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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND THEIR GAY AND LESBIAN CHILDREN

BY

JOAN LOUISE MACKAY

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

IN

COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to all the gay and lesbian adolescents who are struggling to come to terms with their sexuality. May each of you have the courage and strength to be yourself.

ABSTRACT

For gay and lesbian individuals, the adolescent period of development is both confusing and stressful as they try to come to terms with their identity and the social stigma associated with it. A major stressor with which adolescents are faced is disclosing their sexuality to their parents. Although disclosing to parents is a significant concern and stressor for gays and lesbians, little research has been completed in the area of the parent-child relationship. The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between gay and lesbian adult children and their respective parents. Due to the sparse research on the parent-child relationship, the study used a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing a phenomenological method. This method was used as it allowed both the parents and their gay and lesbian adult children to describe their personal experiences of their parent-child relationship from adolescence to the present. Analysis of the parents' data resulted in the following four major themes which seemed to represent a four phase process: Witnessing the Coming Out, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, Shifting Towards Acceptance, and Acts of Acceptance. Many of the parents validated progressing through these stages with all of the parents reporting that they had accepted their children's homosexuality which was demonstrated by their various proactive efforts. As well the children's data were analyzed also resulting in four major themes. These themes included Precursors to Coming Out, Coming to Terms with Sexuality, Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance, and Lessons Learned: Advising Others. The significance of adolescence was evident as many of the gay and lesbian participants recounted experiencing a negative period involving depression, suicidal ideation, and/or school-related problems, with one child reporting an attempted suicide. However, despite the gay and lesbian children's struggles, they safely arrived at a place of self-acceptance. Key to this positive shifting process involved the children disclosing their homosexuality to their parents and others. Additionally, the parents'

love, support, and acceptance that they showed to their children seemed to be vital to this shifting process. Implications for mental health professionals and educators were also discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Terminologies such as homosexuality, gay, and lesbian do not have universally agreed upon definitions (Rothblum, 1994). Some people have considered these terms as referring only to certain behaviors (Falco, 1991) such as participating in sexual activity with someone of the same-sex (Kelly, 1990). Still, others have viewed such terms as only meaning an emotional bond between same-sex partners (Falco, 1991).

Traditionally, sexual behavior and sexual orientation have been viewed as dichotomous, either heterosexual or homosexual. However, researchers have shown that sexual orientation and behavior are not dichotomous but rather they range in degrees (Kelly, 1990). For example, Golden (1987) has developed a multidimensional model of sexual orientation for gays and lesbians. This model consists of the following three dimensions: sexual behavior, sexual or self identity, and participating in gay or lesbian organizations.

According to Golden's (1987) model, some people defined themselves as gay or lesbian based on their sexual behaviors with same-sex partners. Others identified themselves as gay or lesbian but did not currently participate in any sexual activity with same-sex partners. Still others identified themselves as gay or lesbian because they were members of gay or lesbian organizations but they were not currently participating in sexual activities with anyone of the same-sex. Golden suggested that these three dimensions may be overlapping for some gays and lesbians.

The dimension of Golden's (1987) model that has been emphasized in the present study was that of self-identifying as a homosexual. Thus, homosexual and gay will refer to anyone who defines themselves as being gay or lesbian.

Attitudes Towards Homosexuality

Homosexual people have endured a long history of persecution and condemnation in many societies around the world. Throughout history, homosexuality has been associated with negative terminology, such as sins, crimes, and illnesses (Conrad & Schneider, 1980). However, in the past twenty years, a wide variety of growing research has developed suggesting that homosexuality is a natural and appropriate sexual orientation which should be viewed as acceptable as heterosexuality (Gonsiorek, 1988; Hammersmith, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1988; Malyon, 1981; Teague, 1992). This change in attitude became evident in 1973 as homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association and it was also declassified by the American Psychological Association in 1975 (Malyon, 1981). Currently, homosexuality is considered by many as a natural and healthy expression of sexual orientation (Gonsiorek, 1988; Hammersmith, 1987) and is estimated to include 10% of the population. Such an estimate indicates that one of every five families has a gay or lesbian child (Dahlheimer & Feigal, 1991).

Despite the slowly changing attitude towards homosexuality, there exists a portion of society that continues to condemn same-sex attractions (Gonsiorek, 1988; Rothblum, 1994). Such negative attitudes develop as a result of homophobia which can be defined as an irrational fear or a distorted perspective or hatred of gays and lesbians (Gonsiorek, 1988;Weinberg, 1972). Homophobia can become internalized as early as childhood (Anderson, 1994). Such homophobic attitudes can occur not only within individuals but it can also be evident within institutions, organizations, and society at large (Hencken, 1982). For example, homophobia is apparent in the world of mental health professionals. As a result of surveying over 2,500 members of the American Psychological Association (APA), the (APA) Task Force Report on Heterosexual Bias in Psychotherapy reported that biased and inappropriate practice

was discovered in the understanding, evaluation, and treatment of such issues as gay identity development, homosexual relationships, and parenting issues (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991).

The Unique Needs of Gay and Lesbian Adolescents

As a result of being a member of a stigmatized minority, lesbian and gay adults face many struggles and problems, such as discrimination in the family, in the work place, and in the legal and judicial system. Not surprisingly, gay and lesbian adolescents and young adults face similar concerns but perhaps with increased intensity as they have less life experience and less developed coping strategies in resolving such discrimination (Teague, 1992). This is a complex developmental period for gay and lesbian adolescents as they are trying to integrate the many biological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes which are occurring in their worlds. However, this period of adolescence is more complicated for gay youths than their heterosexual peer group as they are also faced with the unique and complex psychosocial challenge of developing a positive identity as a member of a stigmatized minority (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Teague, 1992).

As these gay and lesbian adolescents struggle to come to terms with their homosexuality, they are confronted with additional complex tasks and stressors. One of the most difficult tasks and major concerns with which adolescents are faced is disclosing their homosexuality to their parents (Savin-Williams, 1989b, 1998). Frequently, these adolescents experience isolation, abuse, and rejection from their peers and their parents as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation (Gonsiorek, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; Savin-Williams, 1994). Such stress increases homosexual adolescents' vulnerability to various negative outcomes, such as mental health problems, sexually transmitted

diseases, school-related problems, substance abuse, running away, prostitution, and suicide (Gonsiorek, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Researchers, clinicians, school teachers, and most importantly parents need to learn how to positively cope with their children's homosexuality so as to foster a healthy sense of self in their children. For several years, experts in gay studies have been stressing the importance of the parent's role in the healthy development of the child's gay identity. However, the research completed in this area is limited (Savin-Williams, 1998). Additionally, there are currently no therapy models or guidelines for working with family relationships involving gay or lesbian members (Teague, 1992). Parents, like their gay or lesbian children, have been isolated and have had to cope alone with the difficulties of raising a gay or lesbian child. As a result of such isolation, it seems essential to understand more fully the process that both the parents and their gay and lesbian children undergo as their children develop their gay and lesbian identities. Such knowledge may contribute to the healthy development of future gay and lesbian children and adolescents as well as foster future positive parent-child relationships.

Importance of Present Research

Gay and lesbian adolescents are faced with more complex and different issues than their heterosexual peers, mainly because they have to try to develop a positive identity in a homophobic society (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Teague, 1992). As a result of their homosexuality, they are faced with unique psychosocial concerns and stressors. Disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents is a major stressor and concern for these adolescents as many of them have been rejected and abused, both verbally and physically, by both their family members and peer group as a result of their disclosures (Boxer et al., 1991; D'Augelli, 1992; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hunter & Schaecher, 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a,

1987b; Savin-Williams, 1994). Not surprisingly, these isolated, abused, and rejected adolescents have an increased risk of previously described negative outcomes (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Although many self-help books have explored the significance of the role of parents in the process of gay and lesbian children coming to terms with their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 1989b), the theoretical research, specifically on identity formation, has mostly ignored the importance of the parent-child relationship (Cass, 1979; 1984; de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Savin-Williams, 1989b; Troiden, 1979, 1988). As well, limited empirical research has been conducted on the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian children and the impact of the parents' roles on the children's identity development.

Of the few studies (Cramer & Roach, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989) that have been completed in this area, only one of these studies investigated both the parents' and the children's experiences together in the same study (Ben-Ari, 1995). As well, Ben-Ari's study was limited as he was not able to match the parents' experiences with their respective children's experiences for geographical reasons. This present study involved both the children's experiences and their respective parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship. Because gay and lesbian adolescents are at risk for negative outcomes, it is imperative to study the complexities of this parent-child relationship. From understanding the parent-child relationship, important information may be gained regarding the development of gay and lesbian adolescents. Such knowledge may result in lessening the adolescents' risks of such stressors and negative outcomes, thus contributing to the healthy development of a positive identity for all gay youths.

Purpose of Present Research

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children from adolescence to the present. Specifically, the gay and lesbian adult children were asked to describe their relationships with their parents, and their respective parents were asked to describe their relationships with their children. Ten adult children, ranging in ages from 18 to mid 30s, and their respective parents, ranging in ages from mid 40s to early 70s were interviewed individually. These interviews were semi-structured with the primary research question being, "Would you describe for me your relationship with your parent(s)" or "Would you describe for me your relationship with your gay or lesbian adult child, from adolescence to the present"? The interview questions also explored the parents' perceptions of their children's experiences and the children's perceptions of their parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship. In particular, if and how the relationships changed following the children's disclosures or the parents' discovery of their children's homosexuality were examined through the interview questions. These interviews allowed the evolution of the parent-child relationship to be explored from adolescence to the present.

Method

Because little is known about the relationship between parents and their gay children, a qualitative methodology was used for the present study. A qualitative approach was thought to be more beneficial as it enabled the researcher to discover and to understand more fully the phenomenon of the parent-child relationship (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The limited research that has been completed in this area of the parent-child relationship involved mainly investigating this phenomenon through administering questionnaires. It could be argued that the questionnaires' responses might not be truly reflective of the participants' experiences because the participants

may have fit their attitudes and perceptions into the already prescribed list of item responses (Healy, 1993). Therefore, within the qualitative paradigm, a phenomenological research methodology was used to investigate the relationship between gay and lesbian adult children and their respective parents, as it allowed both the parents and their adult children to describe their personal experiences of the phenomenon (Wertz, 1984).

Outline of Dissertation

This research study explored the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children from adolescence to the present. In Chapter Two, the relevant literature on adolescent development, gay and lesbian identity formation, family and peer issues, suicide and homosexuality, and current research on the parent-child relationship is discussed. In Chapter Three, the rationale for a qualitative, phenomenological research methodology is presented. In particular, methodological issues, participant selection, procedures, and data analysis are explored.

Chapters Four and Five provide a thematic analysis of the data which was collected from interviewing the participants. These themes are exemplified and clarified by using quotations from the interviews with the parents and the children. Finally, in Chapter Six, the key themes which were derived from the data analysis are discussed in relation to the current research. To conclude, limitations of this current research and implications for future studies as well as suggestions for the mental health profession are described.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, an overview of the research literature relating to the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian children is presented. Specifically, topics, such as adolescent development, gay and lesbian identity formation, family and peer issues, suicide and homosexuality, and the current research on the parent-child relationship is discussed. As this relevant research is presented, the importance and purpose of the present study becomes clearer.

Adolescent Development

For all youth, adolescence is a developmental period which involves trying to integrate the biological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes occurring in their world. The physical changes, referred to as puberty, supply the framework for the psychosocial changes. The latter processes, which are dependent on one's culture, construct what is usually referred to as adolescence. The physical changes usually indicate the beginning of adolescence, while integrating the psychosocial changes typically mark the entry into adulthood (Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

Physical Changes

Puberty is a transitional phase during which the adolescents' bodies undergo numerous physical changes as they achieve reproductive maturation (Cameron, 1990). The onset of puberty may begin between the ages of 8 to 16 years of age (Jaffe, 1998). However, on average, puberty occurs over a period of four years, lasting between two to six years in duration (Brooks-Gunn, 1987). Typically, the growth spurt of puberty begins at the age of 11 in girls and 13 in boys (Brooks-Gunn & Petersen, 1983). The rapid rate of the age of physical growth in combination with

the extent of the changes that occur within the body sets puberty apart from the remainder of the biological life cycle (Atwater, 1996).

The physical changes that occur during puberty are controlled by the central nervous system but regulated by the endocrine glands that provide and regulate the release of chemicals or hormones into the bloodstream (Jaffe, 1998). As a result of the combined effects of these hormones, seven key physical changes of puberty occur. These changes include "increases in height and weight, the maturation of the skeletal system, growth of the muscles, increases in the size and functioning of the sex glands, maturation of the reproductive organs, and appearance of secondary sex characteristics" (Atwater, 1996, p. 73-74).

Cognitive Changes

At the same time that the adolescents are undergoing the physical changes in their bodies, they are also undergoing changes in their cognitive processing. For example, they gain new cognitive abilities in the areas of perception, reasoning, and logic. Also, their abilities in memory, planning, language, and problem-solving develop (Siegler, 1991). More importantly, their abilities to think critically emerge which allow them to assess, analyze, and question the information presented to them by outside sources, such as parents, teachers, and peers (Keating, 1990).

Jean Piaget referred to these new cognitive abilities which are developed in adolescence as formal operational thinking. He studied the development of intelligence from the time of infancy to adulthood. He was interested in understanding the way that children and adolescents come to know the world around them. Based on his studies, he developed a four stage theory of cognitive development. Sensorimotor is the first stage of his theory which occurs between birth and two years of age. In this stage, infants come to know and relate to the world around them through their senses as they sense the object and then act on it. The

second stage, preoperational occurs between the ages of two to six years of age. This stage is characterized by the children's prelogical and magical thinking (Piaget, 1972).

Between the ages of 6 to 12 years of age, the children develop concrete operational thinking which enables them to logically think about simplistic ideas and only about physical objects that they can observe. The fourth and final stage of cognitive development, Piaget called formal operational and he believed that this stage occurs in adolescence. At this stage, adolescents are able to use logic to understand abstract and hypothetical ideas. Also, they are able to use abstract symbols in their reasoning. Piaget believed that this type of complex thinking influenced every aspect of the adolescent's life (Piaget, 1972). Formal operational thinking enables adolescents to critically ponder over various issues in their own lives, and their friends' and families' lives, as well as other important issues of the world (Siegler, 1991).

Psychological and Social Changes

Despite the numerous biological and cognitive changes that occur during the developmental period of adolescence, it is the changes in the psychosocial processes which are often considered to be the cornerstone of this phase of human development. The main psychosocial task of adolescence is becoming an independent individual, an autonomous individual no longer needing to depend on others to take care of one's own needs and concerns (Brunstetter, 1985). Therefore, the central goal of adolescence is developing a personal identity or self. This process involves separating from parents, developing significant relationships with peers, and integrating the emotional and biological changes (Cranston, 1992).

Erikson's identity formation research.

Erikson (1963, 1968, 1980) saw development as cumulative and in part determined by genetics. He saw development unfolding in eight stages throughout life, with each stage having a specific developmental task that must be resolved in

order to successfully move to the next stage of development. Erik Erikson believed that the essential psychosocial tasks of adolescence and young adulthood are identity formation and the development of intimate relationships. For adolescents to achieve identity formation, they must have already successfully completed the four prior stages (Erikson, 1963, 1968, 1980). During this period of development, Erikson believed it was essential for adolescents to develop a sense of identity of knowing who they are. Erikson described this sense of identity that adolescents are trying to achieve as follows:

> The wholeness to be achieved at this stage, I have called a "sense of inner identity." The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him (1968, p. 87).

If adolescents resolve this stage of identity successfully, then they develop a realistic sense of self. However, if they are not able to successfully resolve this stage of identity, they experience identity confusion and enter adulthood with an unclear sense of who they are and what they want and expect from the outside world (Erikson, 1968, 1980).

Erikson, like many people of his day, saw homosexuality as being a negative outcome of this stage of development. His prejudiced perspective was evident as he described the following description of developing negative identities in his book, Identity: Youth and Crisis:

> On a somewhat larger scale, an analogous turn toward a negative identity prevails in the delinquent (addictive, homosexual) youth of our larger cities, where conditions of economic, ethnic, and religious marginality provide poor bases for any kind of positive identity. If such "negative identities" are

> accepted as a youth's "natural" and final identity by teachers, judges, and psychiatrists, he not infrequently invests his pride as well as his need for total orientation in becoming exactly what the careless community expects him to become (1968, p. 88).

Despite his negative view of homosexuality, which was typical of the 1950s and 1960s, Erikson's stage of identity formation is still useful in understanding some of the standard issues that are highlighted during this period of development for both heterosexual and homosexual adolescents. Both heterosexual and homosexual youths try to achieve identity formation at this stage of development. However, homosexual youths are faced with additional psychosocial stressors in this process because they must try to develop a strong positive sense of self and identity in the midst of a society which is seen by many gay people and heterosexual people to be homophobic (Teague, 1992).

Marcia's identity formation research.

Although James Marcia has not specifically studied identity formation of homosexual adolescents, he has spent the last thirty years testing and further developing Erikson's model of identity achievement. Based on his research, Marcia (1994) has identified four distinct styles that are used by late adolescents (18 to 22 years) to resolve the identity and identity confusion dilemma. Through means of semistructured interviews and use of rating manuals, Marcia studied the various ways that adolescents develop their identity. These interviews involved questions regarding occupational choices, religious and political ideologies, and personal values and attitudes about sexuality and sex roles. These topics changed depending on the culture but they were always topics which were significant to the person being interviewed. The two key processes that Marcia was interested in assessing were exploration and commitment.

> Exploration refers to the extent to which an individual has genuinely looked at and experimented with alternative directions and beliefs. . . .Commitment refers to the choice of one among several alternative paths in the different interview domains. To be acknowledged as a genuine commitment, the choice made has to be one that the individual, at least at the time of the interview, would abandon only with great reluctance (1994, p. 73).

As a result of his research, four identity styles or statuses were shown to be used by late adolescents to resolve their identity-identity diffusion dilemma. These were identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Identity diffusion described individuals who might have explored alternative paths and beliefs in the past but this involved more wandering than exploration, thus no commitment to any adult roles or values. Identity foreclosure represented adolescents who had committed to adult roles and values but without exploring and questioning these beliefs. These adolescents typically inherited the adult roles and values of their parents and families. Adolescents, who were in identity moratorium, were in the process of exploration. They were desperately trying to arrive at their decisions but had not made any firm commitments to certain roles or beliefs. These adolescents were referred to as being in a state of identity crisis. Finally, identity achievement represented those adolescents who had both explored their options and made a commitment to both an occupational role and ideological beliefs. Therefore, they had successfully resolved the psychosocial developmental dilemma of identity-identity diffusion or as Erikson called it, identity-identity confusion (Marcia, 1994).

According to Marcia, the significant implications of his research findings involved the two processes of exploration and commitment. He believed that these two processes might be the force behind the development of the ego. These two processes might be critical for the development of both cognition and morality as well

as achieving a secure self-identity (Marcia, 1989, 1994). With regards to the implications of these two processes for psychotherapy, Marcia, who is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, suggested that therapy can aid adolescents as they struggle to form their identities by providing a safe environment, thus allowing them to explore both internally and externally various roles and belief systems. Also, therapy may provide the adolescents the support that they require to make the commitment to different or new ways of existing in the world (Marcia, 1994).

Although Marcia did not specifically address homosexual identity formation, his four identity styles and implications for psychotherapy are truly applicable for gay and lesbian adolescents who are struggling to develop their identities. Indeed, these adolescents, like their heterosexual counterparts, have to adjust to the many biological and cognitive changes that are occurring in their lives. However, it is in the area of the psychological and social changes, such as developing an identity, where homosexual youths face more complex and different issues than their heterosexual peers (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Gay and lesbian adolescents have to explore and come to terms with a different and new way of being in the world, which involves being a member of a stigmatized minority (Teague, 1992). This new way of being in the world may result in the gay and lesbian adolescents being rejected by family members, peers, and many components of society. Consequently, this type of exploration requires much support, not only from therapists but from all areas of their lives, as these adolescents try to commit to living healthy gay and lesbian adult lives.

Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

The process of developing a gay or lesbian identity has often been referred to as "coming out" (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993) or identity formation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979, 1988, 1989), and this process has been well researched on homosexual adults throughout the 1970s. However, there has been

very limited knowledge and studies completed in the area of adolescent homosexuality and the coming out process (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). It was not long ago that adolescent homosexuality was considered only to be a transitory phase prior to reaching adult heterosexuality (Remafedi, 1987a). Also, the thought of a healthy adolescent having a well-developed homosexual identity prior to late adolescence was completely rejected (Glasser, 1977). However, recent research has reported that identity formation may begin in childhood, adolescence, or any stage during adulthood (Cass, 1979; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989; Remafedi, 1987a).

Many homosexuals begin the identity formation process during adolescence (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Gibson, 1994). Remafedi's (1987a) study on adolescent homosexuality concluded that "homosexuality is a well-established sexual preference for certain adolescents" (p. 329). Interestingly, his research indicated that homosexual attractions were usually reported between the developmental periods of childhood and puberty. Some researchers have indicated that the age of coming out for both gay and lesbian adolescents has dropped significantly in the past twenty years and that increasingly lesbians and gays have been recognizing their sexual orientation during adolescence (Herdt, 1989; Troiden, 1989). At an average age of 13 years, gay males reported recognizing homosexual feelings (Bell et al.,1981; McDonald, 1982). Similarly, gay male and bisexual adolescents and young adults indicated that they self-identified at the average age of 14 years (Remafedi, 1987a). Also, lesbians reported becoming aware of their homosexual feelings on average between 14 and 16 years of age (Bell et al., 1981). Compared to heterosexual youths, the period of adolescence has gained new meaning and struggles for gay and lesbian youths because they must come to terms with a sexual preference and orientation different from that of the majority of their peers.

Because of the pathologizing of homosexuality throughout history, developmental psychologists and researchers have ignored studying the developmental process of homosexuality (Herdt, 1989). For example, this lack of attention was evident in both Erikson's and Marcia's research (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994). However, many models of homosexual identity formation have emerged. These stage theories of identity formation (or the coming out process) have recognized this as a slow developmental process occurring over an extended period of time (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988). Although these theories have been similar in content and process, they have been different in the number and labeling of their stages (Teague, 1992).

Troiden's Theory of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

Troiden (1988) reported that the first stage occurred before puberty and was known as sensitization. During the sensitization stage, children recognize that they are different from their peer group. Although Bell and colleagues (1981) reported that many of their heterosexual sample indicated feelings of being different during grade school, a greater percentage of the gay and lesbian sample reported similar feelings, but typically gave different reasons for feeling different than their heterosexual peer group. For example, approximately 70% of gays and lesbians stated that they felt "very much" or "somewhat" different than their heterosexual same-sex peer group during childhood. Additionally, they found that gays and lesbians were more likely to report feeling either "very much" or "somewhat" different than their heterosexual peers during grade school (Bell et al., 1981).

Regarding this same study, both gays and lesbians usually inferred their feelings of being different as a result of their interests or behaviors being either gender-inappropriate or gender-neutral (Bell et al., 1981). Although these children realized their feelings of being different, only a small number attributed their feelings of being different to same-sex attraction or to homosexuality. The majority of gays

and lesbians did not see these differences as being related to homosexuality because such socially used labels have no meaning to children (Bell et al., 1981). In the later stages of identity formation, these childhood memories of being different took on additional relevance and importance as these memories supported the individual's new emerging homosexual identity (Troiden, 1988).

One of the most significant changes occurring in adolescence is an increased awareness of sexuality (Cates, 1987). Gay and lesbian adolescents typically reported their first same-sex attraction during puberty (Bell et al., 1981; Cates, 1987; Troiden, 1979, 1989). Many heterosexual early adolescents are attracted to their same-sex peers for a brief time as a result of their fear of the opposite sex or their feelings of admiration or envy for their same-sex friends. This attraction for gay and lesbian adolescents becomes more of a sexual attraction resulting in a permanent orientation (Elkind, 1994).

As a result of these same-sex attractions, the adolescent enters Troiden's (1988) second stage of identity confusion. During this stage, the youth begins to recognize that their feelings and behaviors could be labeled as homosexual. These adolescents experience cognitive dissonance as their feared homosexual feelings and behaviors are contrary to their own previously held self-images (Troiden, 1988) and society's concurrently held images of heterosexuality (Cass, 1979; Herdt, 1989). This dissonance produced "identity confusion, inner turmoil, and anxiety" (Troiden, 1988, p. 107). Malyon (1982) indicated that the main reason that gay and lesbian adolescents experience such dissonance is the result of being culturally and socially negatively predisposed to homosexuality. Adolescents in this stage of identity confusion may have internalized such negative societal reactions and generalized these negative messages to the entire self, thus developing internalized homophobia. This internalized homophobia can be defined as negative feelings about one's sexual

orientation. Such varying degrees of internalized homophobia can range from feelings of self-doubt to overt self-hatred (Malyon, 1982).

Due to the social stigma of homosexuality, adolescents may be left with feelings of guilt which may result in secrecy and isolation. This isolation involves many forms, such as emotional, social, and cognitive (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). As a result of such isolation, gay and lesbian adolescents are subject to additional stressors which are discussed in later sections of this chapter. During this stage of identity confusion, many adolescents coped with and responded to such painful feelings through the use of denial (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988). For example, some lesbian adolescents experimented with heterosexual sex resulting in pregnancies (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Troiden (1988) reported other responses to identity confusion as repairing or eradicating, avoiding, redefining, or accepting such homosexual feelings and behaviors.

When the gay or lesbian adolescents or young adults have accepted and have acknowledged their homosexual feelings and behaviors, then they have entered the third stage of identity assumption. The major tasks of this stage involve defining oneself as a homosexual and disclosing to others (Troiden, 1988). This process of disclosing one's homosexual identity to others is the beginning stage in a larger process which is sometimes referred to as coming out (Coleman, 1982). Previously in this chapter, the term "coming out" was used to describe the process of developing a gay and lesbian identity. Within the identity assumption stage, this same term referred to disclosing one's homosexual identity to a continually changing audience ranging from oneself, to family members, to other homosexuals, and heterosexuals (Lee, 1977). Indeed, coming out has taken on these two related meanings over the years as Gagnon and Simon (1973) defined coming out as both acquiring a homosexual identity and disclosing oneself as a homosexual to others. In the present study, "coming out" may refer to both meanings.

Additional tasks of the identity assumption stage are tolerating and accepting one's homosexual identity, such as associating on a regular basis with other gays and lesbians, experimenting sexually, and exploring the subculture of homosexuality (Troiden, 1988). By the end of this stage, gays and lesbians are beginning to accept their homosexuality (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988).

As a result of this acceptance, they have entered the final stage of identity commitment. During this stage, the individuals have taken on homosexuality as a way of life. This commitment involves both internal and external components. Internally, there is an integration of one's emotionality and one's sexuality as homosexuality becomes viewed as a valid and satisfying identity. Externally, this stage is exemplified by committed same-sex love relationships and the need to disclose one's homosexuality to new heterosexual audiences (Troiden, 1988). At this stage, the individual completely has accepted and has pride in their identity as a homosexual (Cass, 1979).

Troiden (1988) indicated that the identity formation process is not a fixed and determined process but rather it is one which is continually subject to modification and changes. This identity formation process is characterized by the expanding desire to disclose one's homosexuality to heterosexual audiences (Troiden, 1988). However, most gays and lesbians have not disclosed to all of the people in their lives but rather they have determined their level of disclosure based on various factors such as personal, social, and professional (de Monteflores, & Schultz, 1978).

Criticisms and Support for the Stage Theories of Identity Formation

The accuracy and applicability of the stage theories have been questioned (Harry, 1993; Franke & Leary, 1991). For instance, researchers have questioned the stage theories' accuracy to explain the exceptions, such as people who disclose to some but not to others (Harry, 1993; Franke & Leary, 1991). Harry (1993) surveyed over 1, 500 gay men regarding the association between disclosing to heterosexuals

with various social and environmental factors, such as income, type of job, where one lives, and nature of friends. His study indicated that being out or disclosing to others was related to income, job type, location of home, and the nature of one's friends. As a result of these findings, the researcher suggested that perhaps being out to others was more dependent on such social and environmental factors or circumstances in one's life than on being at a particular stage in identity formation (Harry, 1993).

Despite these questions, additional researchers have provided support for such stage theories. For example, Cass (1984) provided data that supported a six stage theory of identity formation based on her clinical work with homosexuals over several years. Additionally, Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) studied this process in a small sample of 27 gay male adolescents (17 to 20 years of age) through the use of questionnaires. Their research indicated moderate support for a stage model of identity formation. Interestingly, the majority of the gay male adolescents in their study reported having reached the stage of acceptance or identity commitment as they had integrated their gay identity into a positive self-image.

Despite the usefulness of these theoretical models of identity formation, such theories have mostly ignored the significance of the parent-child relationship in this process (Savin-Williams, 1989b). For example, Troiden (1988) only indicated that an accepting family was one of numerous factors which facilitated the coming out process. Due to the limited research in this area, the proposed study on the parent-child relationship increases in significance and relevance. Also, Cass (1979, 1984) only briefly mentioned family with peers and church group as being an element that may determine if the homosexual will pass as a heterosexual or disclose in the second stage of identity formation called identity comparison.

Family Issues

As was stated previously, the psychosocial changes that occur during adolescence have often been considered to be of central importance for adolescent development (Brunstetter, 1985). Many of the difficulties that gay and lesbian adolescents face are psychosocial in nature as they seem to arise from external stressors and lack of support (Gonsiorek, 1988). One such external stressor for gay and lesbian adolescents involves disclosing their homosexuality to their parents. Because disclosing one's homosexuality to one's parents is the most difficult and complex task of identity formation (Savin-Williams, 1989b; Troiden, 1988), it is not surprising that this self-disclosure creates a great amount of stress for gay and lesbian adolescents and adults.

Disclosing one's homosexuality to one's parents was reported as a significant step in the identity formation process (Herdt, 1989; Troiden, 1989). Reasons reported for disclosing to parents were as follows: to be honest, to enhance the communication process, to increase family closeness, and to allow their relationship to deepen in love, mutual support, and caring (Ben-Ari, 1995; Martin, 1982; Wirth, 1978). Nondisclosure was most often related to an intense fear that prevented the gay or lesbian adolescent or adult from disclosing (Ben-Ari, 1995). No doubt, this intense fear has contributed to gays and lesbians experiencing extreme stress in disclosing their sexuality to their parents.

Gonsiorek (1988) reported that a major external stressor for the gay and lesbian adolescent was family conflict which was related to the adolescent's homosexuality. As a result of disclosing their sexuality to their families, numerous adolescents were rejected and ill-treated by their families or they were blamed for the dysfunction of the family (Gonsiorek, 1988). Additionally, various experts have indicated that when parents discovered their child's homosexuality, this discovery led

to emotional pain or a family crisis (Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Troiden, 1989, Wirth, 1978).

Similarly, Martin and Hetrick (1988) studied the presenting problems of more than 2000 gay and lesbian adolescents, ranging in age from 12 to 21 years, at the social service agency, the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) in New York city. Their results indicated that isolation was the most significant problem that these youths faced. This isolation was evident in the following three forms: cognitive, social, and emotional. Cognitive isolation was reported by the adolescents as they did not have appropriate and accurate educational information available to them about gay and lesbian issues. Such cognitive isolation contributed to the social isolation that these gay and lesbian adolescents reported. They experienced social isolation as they felt alone, not having anyone with whom to talk. Additionally, they reported emotional isolation as they felt emotionally disconnected from their support systems, particularly their families. Interestingly, family conflict was the second most frequently cited reason by gay and lesbian adolescents for seeking counselling services. These adolescent clients reported feelings of isolation and alienation resulting from fearing the family's discovery of their sexuality or from being abused and being expelled from the home due to discovery or disclosure of their sexuality (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

Indeed, a family's negative reactions to the discovery or disclosure of their children's homosexuality have ranged from wanting to change the child's sexuality (Teague, 1992) to abusing the child or adolescent (Savin-Williams, 1994). Not only have many gay and lesbian adolescents been verbally abused by their families, but they frequently have been physically abused by their families, specifically by parents (Savin-Williams, 1994). Approximately 10% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths were expelled from their homes by their fathers as a result of disclosing their sexual identity (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991). Additionally, nearly 50% of the HMI gay

and lesbian adolescents who reported that they were victims of violence, indicated that they were abused by a family member, usually by a parent (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Similarly, Hunter (1990) surveyed 500 mainly male Black or Latino gay youth who were seeking services at the HMI. Forty percent of the gay adolescents indicated that they were victims of violent physical attacks. Sadly, 61% of the gay-related violence was experienced in the family.

In addition, gay and lesbian adolescents frequently have been sexually violated (Savin-Williams, 1994). Martin and Hetrick (1988) reported that 22% of their clientele (HMI) had experienced sexual abuse. The patterns of sexual abuse of lesbian adolescents were similar to the patterns of sexual abuse of heterosexual females which have been reported in the research. Sexual abuse occurring in the home was typically perpetrated by a family member. Lesbian adolescents who had run away from home were prone to be victims of rape and prostitution. However, in contradiction to the sexual abuse research on male victims, numerous male gay adolescents were sexually abused by an uncle, brother, or father in the home. Additionally, Remafedi (1987b) indicated that 15% of the gay and bisexual male adolescents (ranging in age from 15 to 19 years) in his sample, reported previous sexual experiences with family members.

Peer Issues

As gay adolescents try to come to terms with their stigmatized sexual identity, they also try to develop and maintain peer relationships. Because peer pressure to conform is the norm during adolescence, being a gay or lesbian youth is extremely stressful (Morrow, 1993). Such distress as a result of peer relations was evident as over 95% of the gay and lesbian adolescents reported that they often experienced feelings of aloneness and being emotionally isolated from their peers as a result of their sexuality (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Additionally, 41% (12/29) of the gay and

bisexual male adolescent sample in the study reported losing one friendship due to the issue of homosexuality. Fifty-five percent of the male adolescents indicated regular verbal abuse from their schoolmates; whereas, 30% of the adolescents were physically assaulted, with approximately 50% of the assaults having occurred on school grounds (Remafedi, 1987a).

Gay and lesbian adolescents reported that they were faced with the majority of their peer abuse in the school setting. Many gay and lesbian youths indicated that they were fearful of having their sexuality discovered, tired of having to hide their homosexuality, yet afraid that if they participated in class activities, they might be attacked or humiliated. Thirty-two percent of these adolescents reported wanting to quit school but they were discouraged from such actions (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Similarly, 70 to 80% of the gay and lesbian college students reacted to actual harassment or the fear of such abuse by staying in the closet. They tried to remain hidden from anyone who might identify them as being gay or lesbian. Only 7% reported their harassment to lawful authorities; whereas, 94% of these college students expected to be harassed in the future (D'Augelli, 1992).

As a result of peer abuse and harassment, many gay and lesbian adolescents have experienced numerous school-related problems. For example, Hunter and Schaecher (1990) reported that the outcomes of peer harassment involved poor performance in school, skipping classes, and quitting school. Additional research indicated that 28% of gay and bisexual adolescents quit school prior to completing their diploma requirements. The majority of students, who dropped out, cited verbal and physical abuse and other additional conflicts relating to their sexuality as the main reason for discontinuing their education. As well, approximately 53% of those who remained in school reported that their school performance deteriorated (Remafedi, 1987b).

From the research that was presented thus far, it is evident that gay and lesbian adolescents have been frequently rejected and abused by both family members (Boxer et al., 1991; Gonsiorek, 1988; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; and Savin-Williams, 1994) and peer groups (D'Augelli, 1992; Hunter & Schaecher, 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; and Savin-Williams, 1994). As a result of and intertwined with such abuse and rejection, gay and lesbian youths have experienced cognitive, social, and emotional isolation. Isolation, for many gay and lesbian adolescents, has been the greatest stressor with which they were faced (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Such isolation, abuse, and rejection have been destructive to their mental health and have been often associated with negative outcomes such as difficulties in school, running away from home, substance abuse, criminal activity, prostitution, and suicidal attempts and completed suicides (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Suicide and Homosexuality

Due to the numerous stressors in their lives, homosexual youths in comparison to heterosexual adolescents have been more vulnerable to the previously described psychosocial difficulties, such as drug abuse, school-related problems, depression, conflicts in relationships, being forced to leave their homes, and having to cope on their own. Any one of these difficulties may have placed gay and lesbian youths at risk for having suicidal ideations and/or behaviors (Gibson, 1994). In the 1989 Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide (an American national study), Gibson (1994) explained that gay and lesbian adolescents belonged to the following two populations, which were prone to high suicide risk: being a part of a sexual minority and being within the adolescent age range.

The leading cause of death among gay and lesbian adolescents has been suicide. Young gays and lesbians have been two to three times more apt to attempt

suicide than heterosexual adolescents as they accounted for approximately 30% of the completed suicides reported each year in the United States (Gibson, 1994). These estimates were developed from clinicians' observations and were similar to estimates reported by young gay men's retrospective reports (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Schneider, Farberow, & Kruks, 1994).

In a recent Canadian study (Bagley & Tremblay; 1997), 750 males ranging in ages from 18 to 27 years were surveyed between 1991 and 1992. The survey questions pertained to sexuality and mental health issues such as suicide. Close to 13% of the males identified themselves as being gay or bisexual. Their results suggested that gay-oriented male adolescents, in comparison to heterosexual male youths, have an approximately three times higher risk for participating in self-harming activities. Additionally, Bagley and Tremblay (1997) reported that 62.5% of the male suicide attempters were gay-oriented males. Therefore, these male adolescents (i.e., homosexual and bisexual) have approximately 13.9 times higher risk of attempting suicide than their heterosexual male cohorts. The research team speculated that the high rates of attempted and completed suicide among gay-oriented male adolescents may be related to these adolescents trying to come out in a homophobic society (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997).

Additionally, Schneider and his colleagues (1994) explored the relationship between homosexuality and suicidal behaviors, using a sample of 108 gay male adolescents, ranging in ages from16 to 24 years. Over 55% of the participants reported serious suicidal ideations; whereas, 20% indicated that they had attempted suicide. As a result of their study, Schneider and colleagues (1994) concluded that such suicidal behaviors in gay male adolescents "may be the product both of familial factors that predispose youths to suicidal behavior, and of social and intrapersonal stressors involved in coming to terms with an emerging homosexual identity" (p. 108).

Also, Kourany (1987) reported that 66% of adolescent psychiatrists (n=66) indicated that homosexual adolescents in comparison to heterosexual youths were more serious and more lethal in their suicidal gestures. The psychiatrists frequently cited family-related problems as the main cause for the higher rates of suicide attempts among homosexual adolescents. Adolescent intrapsychic distress was indicated as the second most common cause. Despite the psychiatrists' speculations about gay and lesbian adolescent suicide, many of the child and adolescent psychiatrists (60%) reported no experience of working with suicidal gay adolescents. Kourany (1987) suggested that homophobia may have accounted for this latter finding as the fear of homosexuality has been prevalent in most areas of life.

Recently, Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, and Rosario (1994) examined suicidality, stress, and gay-related stress among 131 male gay and bisexual youths seeking counselling services at HMI in New York city. Their results indicated a higher prevalence of suicide attempts (39%) in comparison to prevalence rates among high school samples of heterosexual youth (11% to 16%) (Adcock, Nagy, & Simpson, 1991). Of those who attempted suicide, 52.1% reported having made more than one attempt. Suicide attempters were more apt to have quit school, to be expelled from their homes, and to have relatives or friends who had previously attempted suicide. Although general life stress was not higher among suicide attempters, gay-related stressors (i.e. disclosing to family) were significantly more common among suicide attempters. As a result of their findings, the researchers concluded that male gay and bisexual adolescents are a higher risk for suicide than heterosexual youths (Rotheram-Borus et al., 1994).

From the research that has been presented, it is evident that gay and lesbian adolescents in comparison to heterosexual youths are at risk for numerous additional stressors as a result of being a member of a stigmatized sexual minority. Among the stressors, with which they are confronted, experiences of isolation, abuse, and

rejection are commonly reported (Boxer et al., 1991; D'Augelli, 1992; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hunter & Schaecher, 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; Savin-Williams, 1994). Such stressors are associated with gay and lesbian adolescents as they are more vulnerable to problematic outcomes ranging in severity from school difficulties to suicide (Savin-Williams, 1994). As a result of such stressors and possible associated negative outcomes, researchers, clinicians, teachers, and parents need to understand the complexities of the parent-child relationship, so gay and lesbian adolescents in the future will be less vulnerable to such stress and negative outcomes.

Research on the Parent-Child Relationship

Parents' Reactions to Children's Homosexuality

In comparison to other family members, parents have been focused on the most in the psychological literature. The emphasis on parents emerged from the psychoanalytic tradition. For many years, this perspective has viewed homosexuality as a result of disturbed parent-child interactions during the child's development (Bieber, 1962). In addition to the psychoanalytic research, parents' reactions to their children's or adolescents' disclosures have been studied to some extent. For example, research has indicated that parents' reactions to their children's homosexuality comprise two phases. The first phase involves the parents attributing their negative misconceptions of homosexuality to their children. As a result of applying these misconceptions, they begin to see their children as strangers. Consequently, during the second phase, the parents experience a tremendous amount of guilt and feelings of failure. Consistent with the psychoanalytic tradition, the parents reported feeling that they were the cause of their children's homosexuality (DeVine, 1984; Jones, 1978, Strommen, 1989).

Additionally, DeVine (1984) reported that the family system, specifically the parents, progress through a series of states of awareness and acceptance in response to their children's homosexuality. The parents may stay fixated indefinitely at any one of the five stages, rather than progressing to the optimal final stage. These stages are as follows: The first stage is "subliminal awareness" as the parents suspect the child's homosexuality due to the child's patterns of behaviors and communications. Secondly, "impact" occurs when the parents discover the child's homosexuality or the child discloses. An atmosphere of crisis is typically present. Thirdly, "adjustment" involves trying to sustain the respectability of the family by encouraging the child to change or to keep the homosexuality a secret. The fourth stage is the "resolution" phase. The family experiences a mourning process for the loss of the presumed heterosexual role of the child and they begin to reject the negative beliefs regarding homosexuality. Finally, the family experiences the "integration" stage as a new role for the child emerges and the family begins to develop healthy means of coping with the child's homosexuality (DeVine, 1984).

DeVine (1984) indicated that the progression through these five stages are dependent on the following three components of the family system: 1. the closeness or "cohesion" of the family, 2. the rules controlling the family's behaviors, and 3. the "family themes" or beliefs and values that govern their views and their interactions with society. These rules and themes are of two types. Some are positive and they aid in the progression through the stages. However, other rules and themes seem to create more stress and obstacles for integrating a homosexual child into the family. For example, the researcher suggested the theme "be as our religion teaches us to be," as being one which would likely create conflict within the family (DeVine, 1984, p. 11). This theme would typically result in the family rejecting the gay or lesbian family member because the family's religion condemns homosexuality (DeVine, 1984).

Gay and Lesbian Children's Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationship

Despite the research that has been completed on parents' reactions to their children's homosexuality, limited research has been conducted on the parent-child relationship and the various factors (i.e. parents' reactions) that impact this relationship. This sparsity of research is evident as the theoretical models of identity formation have mostly ignored the significance of the parental role in the homosexual child's and adolescent's development (Savin-Williams, 1989b). Although the self-help, coming out advice literature stresses the importance and the complexity of disclosing to parents (Savin-Williams, 1989b), the theoretical and empirical coming out research has not addressed this process (Cass, 1979, 1984; de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Troiden, 1979, 1988).

Most of the limited research that has investigated the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian children has been through the homosexual adults' retrospective perceptions of their relationships with their parents (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). For example, Cramer and Roach (1988) surveyed the process of gay sons disclosing to their parents and specifically how the disclosure impacted the relationship between parents and sons. They also were interested in understanding the parental variables that may have dictated the parents' reactions to their sons' disclosures and how parents' responses changed over time. Their results indicated that 63% of the participants had disclosed to their mothers and 59% had come out to their fathers. Regardless of having disclosed or not, relationships with mothers were significantly more positive than with fathers. Although the parental relationship had deteriorated significantly following disclosure, the participants' reports of their current relationships with their parents showed a significant improvement. No significant difference was found in the parental responses as a result of method of disclosure. In other words, the parents' reactions were similar regardless of having

their gay sons disclose to them or hearing the disclosures from someone else(Cramer & Roach, 1988).

Savin-Williams (1989a) also investigated the parent-child relationship through surveying 317 gay and lesbian adolescents and young adults, ranging in ages from 14 to 23 years. The researcher studied how gay and lesbian children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their homosexuality had an impact on their own comfort levels with being gay and their levels of self-esteem. The main findings were as follows: If a lesbian perceived her parents as accepting or that they would be accepting of her sexuality, then she also reported feelings of being most comfortable with her homosexuality. However, her perceived parental acceptance did not predict her level of self-esteem. Among the gay men, if a male indicated that his parents were significant to his sense of self-worth, then a relationship between his perceived parental acceptance and his report of feeling comfortable with his homosexuality was evident. Gay males, who reported being comfortable with their sexuality, indicated greatest levels of self-esteem. These latter findings supported the premise that parents may play an important role in the development of their children's homosexuality, specifically in relation to their children's comfort with and acceptance of their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 1989a).

In this study, Savin-Williams (1989b) also investigated parental variables that may have influenced whether the children have disclosed to their parents and how these parental factors impacted the children's self-esteem. His findings indicated that although lesbians reported less contact with their parents, they were slightly more satisfied with their relationships with their parents than were males. Also, lesbians in comparison to gay males reported slightly greater levels of self-esteem. Additionally, lesbians, who had younger parents and satisfying relationships with their parents, were more apt to have disclosed to their parents. Interestingly, both gay and lesbian adolescents who indicated satisfying maternal relationships reported greatest levels of

self-esteem. Based on both of Savin-Williams' (1989a, 1989b) studies, lesbians who reported positive relationships with their parents tended to be comfortable with their sexuality and tended to have disclosed to their parents. However, very few parental variables were significant predictors of lesbians' self-esteem. Despite parental variables not being significant predictors of gay males having disclosed to their parents, these variables were highly related to gay males' levels of self-esteem.

Parents' Perceptions of Their Relationships with Their Gay and Lesbian Children

Although the three previous studies investigated the parent-child relationship, these studies were restrictive as they only gained information about the parental relationships through the gay and lesbian children's perceptions. In order to understand fully the relationship between parents and their homosexual children, it is also necessary to investigate the parents' perceptions of these relationships. Robinson and colleagues (1989) surveyed 402 parents about their attitudes and perceptions of their relationships with their gay and lesbian children. Specifically, they were interested in parents' initial responses to the disclosure of their children's homosexuality, how they adjusted to the news, and whether they felt responsible for their children's homosexuality. In addition, the parents' attitudes towards AIDS and how this disease impacted their families were investigated.

The results of the research team (Robinson et al., 1989) indicated that the majority of parents felt various feelings, such as regret, confusion, and denial, when they first discovered their children's homosexuality. With regards to how their responses changed over time, 64% indicated experiencing a five-stage mourning process. Through this progressive process, the parents experienced feelings of "shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance." Approximately 97% of the parents had progressed through the earlier stages and had arrived at the acceptance stage. Additionally, the majority of parents (77%) did not feel responsible for their

children's homosexuality and they (87%) believed that their children were born gay or lesbian. More parents of gay males (86%) were more concerned than parents of lesbian females (28%) about their children contracting the AIDS virus. The authors indicated that the positive findings of this study may have been related to the fact that the majority of the participants were from support groups, such as, the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the National Federation of Parents and Friends of Gays (PFOG) (Robinson et al., 1989).

Parents' and Gay and Lesbian Children's Perceptions of Their Relationship

Studying the parent's perspective of the parent-child dyad has been as important as investigating the child's perspective. However, in order to more clearly understand this relationship, both the parent's and the child's experiences must be investigated within the same study (Robinson et al., 1989). Only one study was found in which both the parents' and the children's experiences were explored. In this study, Ben-Ari (1995) investigated the importance of privacy and intimacy in the coming out process. Thirty-two gay and lesbian adult children and 27 parents participated in this study. Although the previously described studies used mainly quantitative methodologies, Ben-Ari (1995) utilized mostly qualitative data (in-depth interviews) with some quantitative components (two questionnaires-demographic information questionnaire and the parental reaction scale). The parents were to indicate their experiences of being disclosed to and their perceptions of their children's experience of coming out. Also, the adult children were to describe their experiences of coming out and their perceptions of their parents' reactions to their disclosures.

Ben-Ari (1995) reported that the majority (66%) of gay and lesbian children indicated feeling fearful about disclosing to their parents. Forty-one percent of the parents indicated that their children had such fears. Over half (52.4%) of the gay and lesbian children feared rejection as a result of disclosure. The majority (63%) of the

children reported that one of their parents knew of their homosexuality before coming out and the same majority of parents indicated that one of them knew of their children's sexual orientation prior to disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995).

The most common reason reported for disclosing was not wanting to live a lie or to hide anymore. Ben-Ari (1995) reported a negative relationship between the children's motive to no longer want to hide their sexuality or to live a lie with the parents' reactions of guilt, anger, and denial. Also, the majority of the parents (88%) indicated that they would have preferred private face-to-face disclosures. Based on these results, Ben-Ari (1995) suggested that children would disclose when they perceived the benefits of coming out as being greater than the gains of secrecy. Additionally, he concluded that parents might more easily adjust to their children's disclosures if they perceived the disclosure process as an act of intimacy.

Based on the five studies that were presented in this section, it was evident that few researchers have investigated the parent-(gay) child relationship and the impact of the parents' roles on the children's identity development. From reviewing the research that has been completed, one serious limitation was evident in four of the five research studies. This limitation was that only children's perceptions (Cramer & Roach, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b) or the parents' perceptions (Robinson et al., 1989) of the parent-child dyad were studied. None of these four studies investigated both the parents' and children's experiences together.

Additionally, all four of these studies' methodologies involved mainly administering questionnaires where the participants had to fit their attitudes and perceptions into the already prescribed list of item responses. It can be argued that the questionnaires' responses were not truly reflective of the participants' experiences (Healy, 1993). Moreover, Ben-Ari's (1995) research was the only study which explored both the perceptions of the parents' experiences and the children's experiences. However, Ben-Ari's (1995) study was limited as he was not able to

match the parents' experiences with their respective children's experiences due to geographical reasons. Indeed, it would have been more beneficial if the study had compared a matching group of parents with their respective children, in order to more fully understand the parent-child relationship (Ben-Ari, 1995; Robinson et al., 1989).

Summary

The research presented thus far has shown that homosexual adolescents are faced with more complex and different issues than their heterosexual counterparts, specifically within the realm of the psychosocial changes (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). For example, homosexual adolescents frequently have been rejected and abused by both family members and their peer groups as a consequence of their sexual orientation (Boxer et al., 1991; D'Augelli, 1992; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hunter & Schaecher, 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; Savin-Williams, 1994). The outcome of such abuse and rejection for these gay and lesbian youths has been their experiences of isolation (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

This isolation, abuse, and rejection has been detrimental to the gay and lesbian adolescents' mental health. Not surprisingly, these stressors have been associated with gay and lesbian youths being more at risk for such negative outcomes as academic difficulties, running away from home, substance abuse, criminal activity, prostitution, and attempted and completed suicides (Savin-Williams, 1994). As a result of gay and lesbian adolescents being at risk for such stressors and possible associated negative outcomes, it is imperative to understand more fully the complexities of the parent-child relationship. By studying this parent-child dyad, the information gained may aid the development of future gay and lesbian adolescents, resulting in these youths having a stronger and healthier sense of self, thus reducing such stressors and negative outcomes.

Although many self-help books have addressed the importance of the role of parents in the coming out process (Savin-Williams, 1989b), the theoretical research specifically on identity formation, has mostly ignored the importance of the parent-child relationship in this process (Cass, 1979, 1984; de Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Savin-Williams, 1989b; Troiden, 1979, 1988). Additionally, limited research has been conducted in this specific area of the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian children. Regarding the limited research which has been completed, only one of the studies (Ben-Ari, 1995) investigated both the perceptions of the parents and the children. However, due to geographical reasons, the researcher was not able to compare the group of parents to their respective children, instead various parents and children participated.

As a result of the lack of research completed in this area, it is evident that there is a need for increased understanding of the gay and lesbian parent-child relationship. A clearer understanding of the process of the parent-child relationship is imperative in understanding the impact of the parental role on healthy gay development. Therefore, in the present study, the parent-child relationship has been explored by examining the experiences of both parents and their respective gay and lesbian adult children. Due to the limited research completed in this area, a qualitative method was chosen to allow the parents' and their respective adult children's experiences of the parent-child relationship, specifically from adolescence to the present, to be explored more fully. By knowing if and how the parents' and their children's perceptions are similar or different, researchers, clinicians, and educators can understand more fully the dynamics of the parent-child relationship. Such understanding will aid clinicians and parents in strengthening the parent-child relationship and in aiding the healthy development of gay and lesbian youth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

A qualitative method was utilized for the present study. A qualitative approach was used because it generates data that has its focus on human experience. Also, it provides a thorough description of individual's experiences of the phenomenon under investigation (Boyd, 1993). Because little is known about the parent-gay-child relationship, this type of question lends itself more to qualitative research than to a strictly quantitative approach. Therefore, a qualitative approach was thought to be more beneficial as it enabled the researcher to discover and to understand more fully the phenomenon of the parent-gay-child relationship (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Moustakas (1994) recognized the usefulness of qualitative research or the human science approaches such as phenomenology. This was evident as he described the seven common characteristics of qualitative research which set it apart from the more traditional quantitative, natural science research methods. First, qualitative research recognizes the significance of investigating experiences which are not able to be studied through quantitative measures. Also, qualitative research investigates an experience in its wholeness in comparison to only studying certain parts of the phenomenon. Thirdly, the human science approach to research explores the meaning or "essences" of the experience instead of focusing on such elements of measurement and explanation. Fourthly, the phenomenon is studied by gathering descriptions of the experience through formal or informal interviews with the people who have experienced first hand the phenomenon. Additionally, qualitative research views the experience of the phenomenon as essential in order to understand human behavior. Also, qualitative research investigates a problem and formulates questions about that problem which typically reflects the interest and involvement of the researcher.

Finally, human science research views experience or behavior as an "integrated and inseparable relationship" between the subject and its object or between the parts and their whole (Moustakas, 1994, p.21).

Within the qualitative paradigm, a phenomenological research method was chosen to investigate the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children. A phenomenological method was utilized as it was believed to be an effective means of exploring the experience and the meaning of the parent-child relationship as it allowed both the parents and their adult children to describe the phenomenon (Wertz, 1984). Phenomenological research allows human experiences to be explored and reflected upon as they are uniquely and innately encountered (Boyd, 1993).

Such qualitative studies are invaluable as they acknowledge that human beings construct their own meaning of their experiences of the world in which they live. In particular, phenomenological methods allow the participants to describe their personal experiences of the phenomenon and how this phenomenon has affected their lives (Boyd, 1993). Consequently, this method provided the researcher with a fuller and a more complete picture of the relationship between parents' and their gay and lesbian children. Therefore, due to its emphasis on understanding individuals' experiences of a phenomenon through description and meaning, a phenomenological method was used.

Although the researcher approached and conducted the present study using a phenomenological method, there is a need to clearly define this type of phenomenology. The phenomenological method that was used in the present study fits under a psychological phenomenology or a more contemporary phenomenology rather than a philosophical phenomenology which is a more traditional approach. The latter is mainly interested in discovering "universal structuring processes of consciousness" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 51). In other words, philosophical

phenomenology focuses on finding universal structures or the universal essence or the basic common meaning of the experience. However, psychological phenomenology examines "the level of structures" of the experience that creates "psychological meaning" in a specific setting or situation. Furthermore, psychological phenomenology does not reduce the description of the phenomenon to a level of universal structures or universal meaning, but rather presents the psychological interpretation of the qualitative description of the phenomenon which is being studied (Polkinghorne, 1983). This type of phenomenology studies the meaning of certain life-events (e.g., wedding, funeral) or the meaning of a process (e. g., grieving, forgiveness) within a certain context. Thus, the psychological phenomenologist would try to understand the nature of the parent-child relationship by examining both the unique and common themes which were derived from the experiences of both the parents and their gay and lesbian adult children (Becker, 1992).

Therefore, in the present study, a phenomenological method within the psychological approach was used to study the experience of the relationship between parents and their adult gay and lesbian children, specifically from adolescence to the present. Indeed, the purpose of this study was not to find the universal structures or universal meaning of the parent-child relationship but rather to derive the key themes, both common and unique, which were reflective of the experiences reported by the parents and their adult children who participated in the present study.

Question

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children from adolescence to the present. Specifically, the parents were asked to describe their relationships with their gay or lesbian children, and their respective adult gay or lesbian children were to describe their relationships with their parents. Both the parents and their adult children were

asked to recount their experiences of their relationship as their children progressed from adolescence to adulthood, highlighting both the positive and the negative.

The primary research questions in the present study were as follows: "Would you describe for me your relationship with your parent(s)" or "Would you describe for me your relationship with your gay or lesbian adult child, from adolescence to the present?". The interview questions also explored the parents' perceptions of their children's experiences and the children's perceptions of their parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship from adolescence to adulthood. In particular, if and how their relationships changed following the children's disclosures or the parents' discovery of their children's homosexuality were explored through the interview questions. Consequently, the evolution of the parent-child relationship during the children's years of adolescence until the present was investigated.

Presuppositions

The emphasis when using a phenomenological method is on attempting to approach the topic of study without any preconceived ideas about what may be discovered in the process of the investigation (Polkinghorne, 1983). This is essential so that the phenomenon can express itself (Osborne, 1990). However, no researcher can approach a study absolutely void of any preconceived notions concerning the study's topic and its outcome because the researcher cannot be completely separated from her own experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). Instead of trying to enter the study free of any preunderstandings, the researcher tries to become aware of her preconceived ideas prior to beginning the study, thus setting them aside and allowing the phenomenon to be described fully (Becker, 1992).

The phenomenological approach requires the researcher to articulate her biases and preconceived ideas concerning the topic of study through a process of self-reflection which is known as bracketing (Osborne, 1990). This process of the

researcher becoming aware of her preunderstandings is a simple one. It entails the researcher reflecting on her previous knowledge and experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied and then writing down all of these reflections (Becker, 1992). As a result of the bracketing process, any reader of the study's report will be able to take the researcher's perspective into consideration. (Osborne, 1990). In addition, this process makes the investigator more aware of her potential influence on the research (Polkinghorne, 1983). Thus, in the following section, I will describe and discuss my presuppositions and my preunderstandings about the relationships between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children.

However, before describing my presuppositions and preunderstandings regarding the topic of the present study, I would like to explain a more personal reason for why I chose a phenomenological methodology. I am currently completing my doctorate program in counselling psychology at the University of Alberta and as a practicing clinician, I both appreciate and value this method as it allows me to utilize so many of my counselling skills. Just as the therapeutic relationship is vital to effective counselling so is the relationship that develops between the researcher and the participant significant in obtaining rich and descriptive data. Indeed, all of the interpersonal skills that I use as a counsellor to aid my clients in feeling safe enough to share their experiences are vitally as important in helping the participants feel at ease in order to share their stories. Additionally, just as I must be continually aware of my own feelings, beliefs, and opinions so as not to allow them to inappropriately impact any of my counselling sessions, so I must bracket my preconceived ideas about the present study, thus allowing the parent-child relationship to be understood more fully (Osborne, 1990).

In order to understand the experiences and perceptions that I bring to this study, I need to take us back to a rural Maritime community in which I was raised. I grew up in a small fishing village where everyone that I knew attended church every

Sunday. I have no recollection of the first time that I attended church because throughout my childhood and my early teen years most of my activities and my friendships were all connected through the church. My memories of growing up in the church are bittersweet. Many dear friendships and close relationships were developed within those walls as those people became my extended family. However, being raised in a God fearing, fundamentalist church was traumatic for me as a child for the images of hell, fire, and brimstone for those who disobey or fall away were firmly planted in my young mind. Not surprisingly, my fundamentalist church and family were not flexible in their thinking or open to differences, thus numerous actions and behaviors were viewed as "evil" or "ungodly," one of these being homosexuality.

Despite my community's and my family's fear of difference, I grew up being drawn to those who didn't quite fit the norm. I recall standing up for those who were being mistreated in the school yard by the bullies because they were different. Despite my acceptance of others' differences, I struggled with my own personal feelings of being different as I questioned my own sexuality from a young age. However, due to the homophobic climate in which I lived, I pushed these feelings and questions down deep inside of me and I tried to live my life ignoring these feelings. In high school, I seemed almost to have forgotten about my prior prepubescent struggle with my sexuality as I was busy participating in sports, band, and dating. Certainly, I did not know anyone who was gay during my school days and the only occasions that I heard words, such as "fag," "gay," or "lesbian," were when they were used in a derogatory manner by students.

My own struggle with my sexuality moved to the forefront once I had completed high school and began university. Prior to attending the university, I attended a Bible College which was connected with the local church in which I was raised. It was during my attendance at the Bible College that I met and developed

important relationships with two women who had an enormous impact on my life. One of these friendships involved one of the new sessional professors who happened to be extremely "liberal" in the minds of her peers. The other was a pastoral counsellor and minister who worked at a neighboring church in the city where I attended Bible College. These two women reminded me of the importance of honesty and the healthiness in questioning. As a result of these two relationships, I began to try to name the feelings from which I had spent most of my life trying to run away. As a result of naming these feelings, I started to find and to talk to other spiritual people, who belonged to other denominations, about their beliefs about God and about homosexuality. From that time of my life onward, I have met and developed vital relationships with certain key people who have aided my painful journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. During my undergraduate university studies, I met and developed close friendships with classmates who disclosed later as being gay or lesbian. During my fourth year of undergraduate studies, I met and became friends with my partner.

When my supervisor suggested the possibility of focusing my dissertation topic on the relationship between gays and lesbians and their parents, I initially was uncomfortable with the subject as I had not disclosed to my own family due to their religious beliefs. But as I studied the research in this area and as I began to interview and hear the stories of both the children and their parents, my own journey towards self-acceptance became clearer which resulted in my disclosing to my family almost a year ago. They responded with rejection and indicated their loss of respect for me as a person, and this relationship continues to be estranged at this time.

My experience of my family's reactions to my disclosure is unlike the supportive experiences reported by the majority of the children in the present study. However, my experience reflects the current research which reminds us of the frequent abuse and rejection that gay and lesbian adolescents undergo as a result of

disclosing to their family and peers (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Although my family's rejection at this time in my life is truly painful, I know that as an adolescent such rejection would have been devastating without other support systems being in place. Without such support, it is not surprising that these youth are at risk for negative outcomes, such as school problems, substance abuse, criminal activity, prostitution, and suicide (Savin-Williams, 1994). Consequently, I accepted this topic for my dissertation because I believe that every study that is completed in this area takes us a step closer to lessening the negative outcome risk of gay and lesbian youth, who are growing up in similar homophobic settings, desperately trying to be themselves.

As a result of my own personal experiences, I entered this study with certain preunderstandings. One of my preconceived ideas upon entering this study was the belief that some of the reactions of the parents in this study would be positive and accepting as a result of the selective sample including some members from two PFLAG (Parent and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) groups in the city. Also, I expected that many of the parents would report experiencing an emotional process when their children disclosed, perhaps initially experiencing negative feelings and eventually becoming more accepting. I assumed that any parents who were involved in this study who came from a more fundamentalist religious background would probably have struggled more with coming to terms with their children's homosexuality than had other parents who were more liberal in their religious thinking.

Additionally, being aware of the homophobia in our society and the many challenges with which gay and lesbian youth are faced in combination with the typical adolescent challenges, I assumed that the gay and lesbian adult children in the present study would have reported experiencing depression, self-destructive thoughts, and suicidal behaviors during their adolescence. Finally, as a result of my own experience of being rejected by my parents and family, and realizing the tremendous

impact of their rejection on my current adult life, I believed that parents play a vital role in gay and lesbian youth developing a healthy sense of self. Indeed, I assumed that the gay and lesbian adult children in this current study accepted their own "differences" more readily when their parents accepted them unconditionally.

Selection of Participants

The objective of selecting participants for phenomenological research is to obtain a complete and varied range of descriptions of their experience. Therefore, the participants must have experienced the phenomenon and also they must be able to supply the researcher with "full and sensitive descriptions of the experience under examination" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 47). The additional requirements for selecting participants in this study were as follows: The gay or lesbian adult children must have disclosed to their parents for at least a year prior to this study. Also, the gay or lesbian children must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study and the participants must be capable of communicating their experiences. Additionally, because no current research has studied the experiences of the parent-child relationship by matching the parents with their respective gay and lesbian children, both the parents and their respective gay children must have agreed to participate in the present study.

Because gay and lesbian adolescents are frequently isolated, abused, and rejected by their parents (Savin-Williams, 1994) and because there are currently no therapeutic guidelines for working with families with gay and lesbian children (Teague, 1992), this study focused on parents who are currently supportive of their gay and lesbian children. By studying supportive parents, knowledge can be gained concerning how these parents positively and negatively coped with raising their gay and lesbian children. From this study, other parents, mental health professionals, and

teachers can learn how to better facilitate and support the growth of their gay and lesbian children, clients, or students.

Approximately four years ago, the researcher's supervisor, Dr. B. Paulson, was contacted by one of the Edmonton branches of the support group, PFLAG. During this contact, PFLAG indicated their interest in being involved in some type of study in the area of gay and lesbian issues. As a result of this initial contact, the researcher and Dr. B. Paulson attended a PFLAG meeting on May 21st, 1995. During this meeting, the researcher spoke of conducting a study in the area of the parent-child relationship. Several parents and adult children expressed their interest in participating in such a study.

Consequently, participants for the present study were obtained through this support group as well as through Outreach, which is a support group for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who attend the University of Alberta. These were the primary sources from which the participants originated. Additional parents and children were asked by PFLAG and Outreach members and they were given the researcher's telephone number to contact if they were interested in participating. These participants were appropriate for the study as they provided the supportive perspective which was being explored in this study.

Because this study is phenomenological in nature, the researcher selected a number of participants necessary to describe the various aspects of the phenomenon under study (Wertz, 1984). In this study, 10 children and their respective parents were individually interviewed. With regards to 3 of the 10 children, both the father and the mother were interviewed together. These 2 parent units are referred throughout this study as 1 parent as they were interviewed together representing 1 parental unit, thus 10 parent-child dyads. The remaining 7 parents who were interviewed were comprised of 2 single mothers, and 5 parents (4 mothers and 1 father) from 2 parent homes. In order to investigate the possibility of sex differences,

an equal number of gays and lesbians, 5 men and 5 women, were interviewed. If the initial 10 children and their respective parents had not been able to sufficiently describe the phenomenon, then additional parents and children would have been interviewed.

The participants will be described in general terms only in order to respect and maintain the anonymity of both the parents and the children. The parents ranged in ages from mid 40s to early 70s. They were all professional people working in a wide range of careers including such jobs as secretary, office manager, legal assistant, teaching assistant, child welfare worker, sales representative, administrative officer, accountant, certified safety professional, and health care worker. Eight of the parents had other children in addition to their gay or lesbian children. All of the parents interviewed lived in the province of Alberta. The children ranged in ages from 18 to mid 30s. Their ages of coming out ranged from 12 years old to 26 years of age. Two of the children were students in high school and university. The remaining 8 children worked in varying occupational fields such as, a network analyst, specialty painter and interior designer, retail manager, actress, restaurant worker, government employee, and musician. Eight of the 10 children lived in Alberta while 2 lived in other provinces.

Procedure

After the participants were solicited, the researcher contacted the participants by telephone and reminded them of the purpose of the study. The researcher described to the participants her interest in exploring the parent-child relationship. The participants (both parents and children) were told that if they were interested in being involved in this study, it would entail a 60 to 90 minute interview in which they would describe their relationship with their parent(s) or with their child, from adolescence to the present. After participants agreed to take part in the study, suitable

interview times for each of the participants were arranged. Finally, a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix A) were provided for the participants prior to the interview in order to allow them to reflect on the parent-child relationship so that they would be able to describe the experience more fully.

As stated previously, this type of interview process allowed the researcher to utilize many of her counselling skills which she uses daily with her clients, to aid them in feeling safe and secure enough to share their experiences. Utilizing these interpersonal skills, the researcher began the interviews by spending time getting to know each of the participants and developing rapport with each of them. Building good rapport and trust are essential because without them an investigator is unlikely to capture the participants' descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990). Regarding the importance of rapport and trust, Becker (1986) explained the following: "When the interviewee feels joined and understood by the interviewer, he/she can increasingly relax into recounting unpretentious life-experiences, rather than feeling compelled to analyze and synthesize them into impressive insights" (p. 113).

Rapport was developed with each participant, as the researcher explained her background and interest in this area of research. Once again, the nature and the purpose of the study were explained to each of the participants as the study description form (see Appendix B) was described. Once the participants understood the purpose and format of the study, the researcher informed the participants about the contents of the consent form (see Appendix C). They were informed that the descriptions of their experiences would be kept confidential. Also, the participants were apprised that they could discontinue the study at any time, if they so chose, and in that case their descriptions of their experiences would be destroyed. After the researcher answered any questions concerning this study and/or the consent form, each participant read and signed the consent form. Ethical approval for this study was

obtained from the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta.

Although there are various strategies used to elicit descriptive data in phenomenological research (Wertz, 1984), the researcher used interviewing as it was believed to be the best means of obtaining rich descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Becker, 1986). A minimally structured interview was utilized. The participants were asked to describe their experiences of their parent-child relationship, from adolescence to the present. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were used as probes only when the participants seemed to have nothing further to say about a certain aspect of the phenomenon. These questions were used to evoke further conversation that would illuminate the phenomenon being studied (Colaizzi, 1978).

Also, the researcher asked the participants to elaborate on certain memories, feelings, or thoughts that they previously had mentioned and requested the participants to share additional memories or examples of the experience (Becker, 1992). As well, the researcher was responsible for clarifying any ambiguous statements or unclear ideas presented by the participants (Polkinghorne, 1983). A successful interview is, "One in which the interviewee can take the research relationship for granted, can sink into the descriptive details of his or her experiences of the phenomenon, and can give details and nuances that bring the researcher into the lifeworld" (Becker, 1992, p. 40).

Five of the interviews were conducted at the researcher's place of employment. Seven of them were conducted at the researcher's home, six were conducted at the participant's home, and the remaining two were conducted through the email system of the computer. The latter two participants utilized the email system as face-to-face interviews were not possible due to distance and scheduling problems. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were tape recorded, with the participants' permission, and then transcribed into their

written form. For the two participants who utilized the email system, the interview questions were sent to them and they were encouraged to write as much as they could to describe their experiences. After they had written their descriptions of the experience, they emailed their responses to the researcher for analysis.

After the 20 interviews were completed, the researcher believed that the various aspects of the phenomenon of the parent-child relationship had been explored fully, thus no additional participants were interviewed (Becker, 1992). Once the researcher analyzed the data of the parents, then the data of the children were analyzed. Following the analysis of both sets of data, a copy of the analysis of the first and second order themes were sent to each of the participants. The parents were sent the analysis of their data and the children were sent the analysis of the children's data. After a period of three to four weeks passed, the researcher contacted each of the participants by telephone and discussed with them the extent to which the data were true to their experiences. This process served as a means of validating the analysis to ensure that the data and analysis were reflective of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

The key stage of phenomenological research is data analysis. The objective of this process is to derive from the collection of participants' protocols a description of the key features of the phenomenon of the parent-child relationship (Polkinghorne, 1983). The procedural steps that were used in the present study were similar to those steps proposed by Colaizzi (1978) and they are as follows:

1. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed into a written format. Characteristics of the participants during the interviews were noted, such as tone of voice, the speed at which they spoke, and their various emotional states (i.e.,

laughing, crying, sighing). The two e-mail interviews did not allow for such observations.

2. Each transcript was then read several times in order to develop a sense of each of the participant's overall experiences of the parent-child relationship. Attention was focused on the similar statements that each participant used as well as common descriptors that the participants used to describe their experiences.

3. Next, each transcript was reviewed and all of the key phrases or sentences that each participant used to describe his or her experiences of the parent-child relationship were selected. Colaizzi (1978) referred to this step as "extracting significant statements" (p. 59). In transcripts where repeated sentences and phrases illuminated the same aspect of the phenomenon, only one statement was selected for that aspect in each transcript.

4. These selected phrases and sentences were then transformed into themes to describe their overall meaning. This process was completed for each transcript and Colaizzi (1978) labeled this stage "formulating meanings" (p. 59). Consequently, a theme was developed to capture the meaning of each matching phrase or sentence. This process of selecting the key statements and then formulating themes was completed for each of the participants and this procedure is known as a within persons analysis (Osborne, 1990).

5. Then, all of the key statements and formulated themes which were derived from each of the parent's transcripts were pooled together and grouped into more abstract themes. These themes were labeled first order clusters or first order themes of the parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship. Subsequently, these latter themes were clustered into even more highly abstract themes called second order clusters or themes. This process of clustering each of the parent's key statements and themes into first and second order clusters is known as between persons analysis (Osborne, 1990). This analysis was also completed on the adult children's

transcripts. All of the key statements and formulated themes which were derived from each of the adult children's transcripts were pooled together and underwent this same process (Colaizzi, 1978).

6. As a result of the data analysis process, the researcher was left with two groups of final themes, one group representing the parents' experiences and the other group representing the adult children's experiences. These two groups of final themes were to reflect the meaning of the parents' and children's experiences of the parent-child relationship during the children's adolescence and young adult years.

7. In order to validate each group of final themes, the first and second order themes were referred back to the original transcripts. Once these themes reflected the descriptions from the transcripts, then a copy of both the first and second order themes were given to each participant, either the parent or the child, for validation (Colaizzi, 1978).

Trustworthiness: Credibility and Empathic Generalizability

The integrity, sensitivity, and research skills of the investigator are crucial to having a valid and reliable qualitative study. In quantitative research, validity is dependent on precise construction of the test and/or the instrument so to ensure that the test is measuring what it is supposed to measure. However, in qualitative studies, the researcher becomes in many ways the instrument through which the data is collected (Patton, 1990). Therefore, validity which also may be referred to as credibility involves establishing the truth and understanding of a specific experience or phenomenon. Although reliability in quantitative research refers to stability and consistency of findings, within the qualitative realm, it is often referred to as trustworthiness as it involves meaning which remains constant and transcends changing facts (Osborne, 1990)

In order to ensure the validity of the findings, the researcher has taken the followings steps: bracketing, checking and rechecking the findings to ensure they are true to the participants' original protocols, and taking the findings back to the participants for validation. Bracketing, as discussed and completed by the researcher earlier in this chapter, is a process of self-reflection in which the researcher identifies her perceptions, preunderstandings, and experiences with which she approaches the study. As a result of bracketing, the researcher becomes aware of her own biases and preconceptions about the study, thus enhancing the validity of the results. Additionally, bracketing allows the reader to understand and to take into consideration the researcher's perspective when reading the findings (Osborne, 1990).

Another means of validating the findings is to ensure that the results are true to the participants' protocols. In other words, the first and second order themes should be truly reflective of the participants' experiences described in the transcripts. With regards to this step, the researcher meticulously checked and rechecked the themes to ensure that each one was reflective of its protocol's excerpt. Also, colleagues of the researcher also participated in this peer review process, thus aiding both validity and reliability of the findings. Finally, the third means of testing the validity of the findings involved going back to the participants and allowing them to validate the findings. This step of verifying with the participants is probably the most significant means of validating the results (Leininger, 1985; Patton, 1990).

After the researcher completed the data analysis, a copy of the findings were sent to the participants for further validation. After each participant had received a copy of the findings, the researcher contacted them by telephone in order to discuss and validate the findings. The researcher was able to discuss the findings with all of the parents but was not able to receive feedback from two of the adult children. Most of the participants, both the parents and the children reported that they saw their experiences in the data analysis. With regards to the parents' feedback, some of their

comments were as follows: "I didn't realize how many others felt the same way that we did"; "We saw our experience in it and we talked to other parents who said that they felt the same way"; "Absolutely, felt it reflected my experience"; and "Definitely, most of it fit". Because the parents' experiences reflected a process of acceptance, a few parents stated that some of the results reflected their experiences but other results did not. For example, a few noted that they did not experience the negative feelings as others reported because they believed that they were more accepting from the beginning. However, these same parents understood that these results were still reflective of the majority of the parents in the study.

With regards to the children's feedback, some of their comments included the following: "A lot of it sounded like my experience"; "Felt that it mostly fit"; "Pretty well reflective of what I went through"; and "Some of it fit but some didn't, but I saw the other aspects that didn't fit as reflective of other children's experiences". Indeed, a few of the children also commented, as did some of the parents, that some of the results were not reflective of their experiences. For instance, a few children did not feel they experienced a negative period such as depression but they also were aware that the majority of the children did report such feelings. Overall both the parents and the children reported that the results reflected fully or partially their experiences. A few of the participants' experiences were not reflected in all aspects of the derived structure or process of the phenomenon. Sometimes certain participants did not share all aspects, but rather only shared some common aspects of the derived structure or process. However, it is the shared structure or process which is most significant to the researcher (Osborne, 1990).

Additionally, another means by which the findings were validated involved additional people, outside of the participants, reading the results and recognizing their own experiences reflected in the data. This is referred to as empathic generalizability (Osborne, 1990). As the researcher verified the findings with the participants through

their telephone conversations, the researcher was informed of other people, such as friends of the participants or other PFLAG members who read the findings and saw their own experiences reflected in the results. Indeed, the structure or process of the parent-child relationship resonated with the experiences of these additional children and parents, thus further validating the findings (Shapiro, 1986).

Finally, the results of the parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship support and aid the validity and reliability of the results of the children's experiences and vice versa. This is evident as both the parents and the children described and discussed similar aspects of the phenomenon. For example, the children described the second order themes, Inner Struggle with Being Gay and Taking Risks: Exploring, Owning, and Disclosing Sexuality. In comparison, the parents described similar second order themes such as Experiencing Pain: Struggling to Come to Terms with Sexuality and Out of Darkness: Coming into Their Own. Both the parents and the children described similar experiences of the children coming to terms with their homosexuality which seemed to be significant to the phenomenon. Indeed, having the children and their respective parents participating in the present study allowed for two sets of data which in turn aided the reliability and validity of both sets of findings.

In the next two chapters, the findings of both sets of data will be described. Chapter Four will describe the results of the data analysis of the parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship. Subsequently, Chapter Five will describe the findings derived from the analysis of the children's experiences. Both chapters will describe and support the findings by incorporating powerful quotations from both the parents' and the children's interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS: PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

Qualitative research does not approach the topic under investigation with preconceived hypotheses. Instead, the objective of utilizing a phenomenological method within the qualitative framework is to discover the essential characteristics of the phenomenon and then express these through verbal descriptions (Polkinghorne, 1983). Therefore, in this chapter, the results which developed from the interviews with the parents are presented. These results represent the first and second order themes of the parents' experiences of their relationships with their gay and lesbian adult children, specifically from adolescence to the present. Within these results, the parents' understanding of the dynamics and the process of their parent-child relationships with their gay and lesbian children are described.

First and second order thematic structures were created through the process of data analysis with its stages of selecting key statements and creating themes. These core themes were derived from the interviews with the parents in response to the research question, "Would you describe your experiences of your relationship with your gay or lesbian adult child throughout the years, specifically from adolescence to the present?". The objective was to try to discover the core themes that the parents shared with regard to their experiences of the parent-child relationship.

As a result of the process of data analysis, the following themes were derived as core markers of the parents' experiences of their relationships with their gay and lesbian adult children from adolescence to the present:

Witnessing the Coming Out

- Experiencing Pain: Children Struggling with Their Sexuality
- Being Prepared for Disclosure
- Out of Darkness: Children Coming into Their Own

Emotional Reactions to Disclosure

- Fears
- Self-Blame
- Relief
- Other Reactions
- Loss of Grandchildren
- Regrets

Shifting Towards Acceptance

- Insight into the Child
- Tolerance and Self-Growth
- Stronger Parent-Child Relationship
- Moving Forward

Acts of Acceptance

- Embracing Acceptance
- Proactive Parents
- Advising Others
- Disclosing to Others

Explanation of Themes

In this section, each of the four second order themes and their subsequent first order themes are described in detail. In order to fully understand each of the themes and their origins, excerpts from the interview transcripts of the ten parents are integrated throughout the text. The four second order themes are as follows: Witnessing the Coming out, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, Shifting Towards Acceptance and Acts of Acceptance. Witnessing the Coming Out was referring to the parents' process of observing or being eye-witnesses to their children's experiences of growing up, struggling, and coming to terms with their homosexuality. Emotional

Reactions to Disclosure described the varying emotions that the parents experienced in response to finding out that their children were gay. The third structural theme, Shifting Towards Acceptance was referring to a shift that occurred within the parents' process. As a result of this shifting process, the parents seemed to move beyond their initial raw emotions and began to understand and to accept their children's homosexuality. Finally, Acts of Acceptance, summarized the various ways that parents demonstrated their acceptance of their gay and lesbian children.

Witnessing the Coming Out

Witnessing the Coming Out was one of the second order themes which emerged from the data. Within this theme, the parents described their children's painful struggles, specifically during adolescence, with coming to terms with their sexuality. Additionally, the parents commented on the various aspects of their children's process of preparing for disclosure such as their fears, reasons, and hints. As well, the parents observed their children undergo a shifting process which involved the children moving from a place of dark and painful conflict to one of acceptance. This shifting process involved the children accepting their own homosexuality.

Experiencing pain: Children struggling with their sexuality.

Five of the parents indicated that their children had struggled with depression. Also, four parents reported that their children had suicidal ideation, with two-parents reporting suicide attempts. Specifically regarding the males, four of the five parents recounted their sons' struggles with depression during adolescence (i.e., early teens to early twenties). Only one son was reported to have no depression. Also, three of the five sons struggled with suicidal ideation and one attempted suicide. Faye explained her concerns over her son's depression and suicidal ideation in these words.

> He always seemed to be fairly sad . . . as he went through adolescence, and in his late twenties or late teens and early twenties. I could tell he was more and

> more depressed. And that was the whole point, I never could reach him. I was often talking to him and was saying, "What's bothering you?". Because I could tell he didn't sleep much, he didn't, like stayed up late and then was tired in the morning and just things, things like this. And I was actually very worried about him being suicidal. And I did address it with him, and told him, I said I was worried about him and made him promise me, never to commit suicide. . . .I found out later on, after he had come out, he had contemplated suicide quite often and he has said like the only reason why he didn't follow through with it was because he knew, [if he committed suicide] he would physically kill his parents too.

According to the parents, their sons' depression and suicidal ideation seemed to be related fully or partially to their struggles with their sexuality. Dora believed her son's depression and suicidal ideation were related to his struggle with his sexuality. Although he also was dealing with a physical disability, she saw his struggle with his sexuality as the main reason for his depression and suicidal ideation. Regarding this, she explained,

> I think it [depression and suicidal ideation] mostly had to do with his sexual orientation. He hasn't, only now . . . like this summer is one of the first times that he's letting, the way that his disability feels to him and his body image really start hitting home.

Dora continued to explain her son's struggle to come to terms with his homosexuality as follows:

> And so I got him seeing a counsellor not specifically for that [coming to terms with his sexuality] but that was included to help him come to terms with that [being gay] because he really . . . everything in the media because he's a very very aware person and he'd listen to CBC and he was always tuning into . . . so any media stuff that would come through normally isn't positive just

> terrified him. So he didn't want to be [gay]. He'd say, "Well maybe I like girls too." And he did like girls and he still does like girls but he's not attracted to girls. He's about 13 by the time he actually just, and it wasn't a coming out to me, it's just he finally settled himself. Well, he knew the name all along, he just accepted it [that he was gay]. He knew the name [gay] from I don't know how old, ten at least. He was getting suicidal and I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. I just encouraged him,"You have to be what you are. If you keep fighting this and feeling like this, you're going to drive yourself in to the ground because it [being gay] can't be that bad."

Both Reg and Debbie also believed that their son's suicide attempts and suicidal ideation were related to his coming to terms with his homosexuality. They explained,

> He was 15 I'd say [when he attempted suicide]. Probably 15. An attempt at 15. And a threat, not really a threat, more than a threat, about 18 or 17. . . .He had attempted before [at 15]. But then, after his friend died he was very suicidal,for two years, [17 and 18] I would say. And that was my question to him when hecame out and said he was gay, I said, "Does that mean that you're not suicidal anymore?" and he said, "No. I'm not." It [his suicidal ideation and attempt] was connected [to his struggle with his sexuality]. Yes, it definitely was.

In comparison to the sons, three of the five daughters experienced a negative period during adolescence (i.e., early to late teens). However, this negative period was characterized by depression and a suicide attempt for only one daughter. John and Elizabeth reported their worry over their suicidal and depressed daughter. Their concerns intensified as they both had to be away from their daughter for a short period of time due to John's career. Elizabeth described their feelings of concern.

> She'd been really depressed so it was worrying us. John had to leave [on business], and decide on a career opportunity. He didn't want to go on his own, and make the decision. He wanted, he said he wasn't going to make it without me being there. So I felt very torn.

Regarding this fearful incident when their daughter attempted suicide, John explained,

> The most worrisome, maybe it's not the most negative, it was and is in my mind, was when we called, called her from away to see how she was getting along, and she just sounded like she wasn't there. It was just terrible really. The distance is bad enough. But the little lost voice at the other end and we were worried, that we knew something was wrong. We called some friends to make sure that she wasn't alone in the house or anything like that. And that was probably the most scary thing in my whole life.

This negative period for the other two daughters was characterized by being withdrawn, temperamental, having a distant relationship with parents or being rebellious, secretive, and deceitful. These parents also believed that their daughters' struggles during this negative period seemed to be fully or partially related to their struggles to come to terms with their sexuality. Susan believed that her daughter's struggle with coming to terms with her sexuality contributed to more difficult and rebellious years during her adolescence. She stated,

> I think that struggling with her sexuality had a great deal to do with it [rebellious and difficult teen years], trying to find herself. I don't think I would have gone through as much, or we wouldn't have gone through as much particularly with her Dad, had she been really comfortable with who she was, had she been quote "a normal child." So, I think it had a lot to do with it. I really do.

One set of parents were uncertain of the relationship between depression and/or this negative period with their daughter's sexuality. In contrast to the three

daughters who experienced depression and/or a negative period, the two remaining daughters were reported to have had an open relationship with their parents during this period of adolescence with no period of depression. Gillian commented on her open relationship with her daughter during her adolescent years as follow:

> I didn't have any problems with her. She was never, there was a lot of trust I think so I didn't have to say you have to be in at 10:00pm because she was always open about where she was and what she was doing and always made good judgments. So I didn't have those kind of struggles with her.

As well, Sandra, on reflection, did not believe that her daughter experienced a negative period of depression. Regarding this, she reported,

> I don't think she did have feelings of deep depression or suicide. But I am not sure that she would have shared those feelings with me as she was very protective of me and wouldn't have wanted to worry me in that way. So I guess the correct answer is I don't know. She has always been very up or very down. Her moods and emotions fluctuate in a wide swing. My own moods and emotions are exactly the same so it wouldn't have alarmed me if she were down or very up. She is so determined I can't imagine that suicide would ever have been an acceptable option.

Preparing for disclosure.

Two parents had no idea that their children were gay prior to their children's disclosures. For instance, Faye reported that she had no idea that her child was gay prior to his disclosing. She explained,

> And he says himself, he had done and has done everything, to really conceal it and hide it [his homosexuality] away, you know. Like sometimes you hear and I have heard it from other parents, that children kind of leave a hint like, leave some books open, then you start wondering, you know. But he never did anything, like he did not want to be found out. Like some kids . . . they

> don't tell the parents but they leave enough hints for the parents to, catch up, if the parents are willing to catch up and not ignore. But he did not do that.

Also, Gary acknowledged that he had no idea that his son was gay prior to his son's disclosure. Regarding this, Gary stated, "It [his disclosure that he's gay] was a shock. I don't think his mother or I had any sense that this [being gay] was a part of his nature".

Three parents indicated that they had missed signs or hints along the way that their child was gay. However, four of the parents received mixed messages and were confused because their children had been dating people of the opposite sex. For example, Sandra reported that she was somewhat confused since her daughter had boyfriends in the past. Her explanation was as follows:

> I can't remember specifically what the conversation was that day but her sibling said that to me, something like, "Do you think she is gay?". At that time, she would have been about 24 years of age. It was interesting because I think the thought was already in my mind but I don't think it had reached a level of awareness yet because I wasn't shocked at what her sibling had said or it was kind of like, "Yeah, maybe." And probably the reason for that is because she had some relationships with males. Even had lived with a male. So, it would take a while for this to sort of hit home, right. And then I said, "I don't know, maybe you should ask" or something like that. Her sibling didn't ask but then she told me and I think by the time she told me then I was starting to think on it more and observe.

Regarding reasons for disclosing, two of the parents believed that their children's partners had hastened the disclosing. Debbie commented that her son and his partner had set a deadline for disclosing to their parents.

> And basically when he came out to us, he had been going with his partner for, they'd been going together for six months and they had agreed that if they

lasted six months they had to come out to their parents. So a deadline had happened, yeah.

Two other children disclosed with urgency because they could no longer keep it a secret. This became evident as Faye recounted, "I think he got so desperate that he couldn't keep it [his secret that he's gay] in. I think there was a point when he had to do something, and come out." In addition, three parents reflected that their children were afraid to disclose as they feared rejection and loss of the parent-child relationship. JoAnna acknowledged that her daughter was too afraid of disclosing to her despite their close relationship. She explained,

> It's not an easy thing for these kids [to disclose that they are gay], it really is not, you know. They just, they're so afraid of rejection. Like even with my daughter, we were close, like I told you, and it was still hard for her. Although her friends told her, I'd be okay.

Also, Susan explained that her daughter was hesitant over disclosing her sexuality as a result of being afraid of losing her mother's love and support. She stated that,

> She said at one time, unbeknownst to me, that when she did come out to me she hesitated, and that hurt me, because I didn't ever think that she would have a hard time coming to me about anything. She hesitated because she was afraid that I wouldn't love her anymore . . . and that never entered my mind. Never even entered my mind. So that was the big thing that held her back.

Out of darkness: Coming into their own.

As stated earlier by the parents, seven children went through a negative or dark period during adolescence, such as depression , suicide attempts, and/or distant and mistrustful relationships with their parents. Five parents reported that their support, love, and acceptance were key in aiding their children a safe journey to the other side of this negative period. Also, three parents believed that the support provided by their children's friends was essential.

Reg commented that his son's friends made him and his wife aware that their son was threatening suicide. Following the devastating death of a close friend, Reg's son had written a suicide letter and had selected a day when he would kill himself. Reg believed that the unconditional love and support that he, his wife, and his son's friends demonstrated to his son contributed to his son overcoming his depression and suicidal tendency, and accepting his gay identity. Reg expressed the impact of this collective unconditional love on his son's life as follows:

> And our actions showed him, along with the pain and the anguish that he saw the parents of his friend [who committed suicide] go through, and we expressed to him just, maybe more than expressed, showed him how much we loved him from that point on. And he had been distancing himself from us, getting angrier and angrier and angrier. And, we didn't care. "Well get as angry as you want. We still love you. And that's the bottom line of the thing." And we made it so difficult for him to do anything, and I went to counselling, and tried to get him to go to counselling and finally his friends took him to counselling. And the peer support, the support of his work, everybody just came together, until he found himself. . . .We started looking at what do we have to do to make this house safe. Take down the curtains. Take out the knives. You know, not have a pill in the house. And we realized that we can't, we can't stop him if he really wants to do it [kill himself]. But we can turn around and show him just how much he means to us. And our attitude certainly changed that day [the day that our son's friends called and told Reg and Debbie that their son was threatening suicide].

Faye also reported that her family's acceptance of her son's homosexuality saved his life. Regarding this she stated,

> I think, had my husband and I rejected him, I think he would have committed suicide. Yeah, I think if the family would have rejected him, he would have

committed suicide. Like if we would have made a big deal over it and said, "How could you do something like this?" You know, how some parents sometimes have a bad reaction.

Also, three parents indicated that professional counselling and/or self-help counselling programs aided their children's progress towards self-acceptance. John and Elizabeth were also very attentive to their daughter as a result of her depression and suicidal attempt. They commented on her steps to recovery, such as talking to counsellors and friends and letting her parents know what she needed. They reported,

> We didn't let her out of our sight for two seconds, for a while. It didn't actually take long, we took longer to recover than she did. . . .She was good at taking positive steps after that, like counselling. Yeah. Well we had to some how give her room . . . so we worried a hell of a lot. Tried to be around when it mattered, but also tried to let her cope with it too. And she did, as I say, she did take help. She found a teacher she could talk to, a counsellor, and a few other people. I think she recognized herself that she um, she needed to let something out. And um, in many ways, in a lot of ways she actually helped train us. She took the initiative . . . and we would come along and help.

Additionally, two-parents reported exercise, artwork or having a sense of humor as helpful tools in aiding the children through this depressed or distant period towards self-acceptance. Reg reported witnessing his son's healing journey through his son's artwork in the following:

> He couldn't find a way out of that hole. One of the things, that has helped him, and kind of on a positive side, he's very "artsy," a very good drawer and things like that, and he can express himself, and he does express himself, on canvas. And, one of the things that helped bring him out was he drew, a great big painting one day, of a stairway, this little tiny person down at the bottom that couldn't reach up even the steps, the steps were too high. There was a gun,

there was blood coming out of the barrel of the gun. It was black and greys and drops of red. And then, as he started feeling better, he repainted the same picture. And, this time, the person was up the steps, two or three spots. There was a ladder, that helped [the person] get up a little higher. The door was open a crack. And there was light coming in along the side and across the bottom. There was still the gun and all the other parts and pieces there, but this time there was hope. . . .And since then, his paintings have become brighter, away from the blacks. And there is some color in them, which I think really does express, the way he is.

This shift from a negative to a more positive period during adolescence seemed to involve the children coming out or disclosing to their parents and others, and coming to terms with themselves, specifically with their sexuality. Consequently, such negative periods, through which the children had lived, were followed by disclosures of their sexual orientation. Dora believed that her son's transition from his depression and suicidal ideation to being more happy and content was related to his accepting his homosexuality. His acceptance of his sexuality seemed to be aided by participating in a self-help counselling program, and coming out to others, including the gay community. Regarding this, she explained,

> He definitely got much better even while he was in that school for the last year that he was there once he found that program [self-help counselling] and once he came out to the first person he came out to and started going to the youth [gay] group that he was, even though it wasn't a great one and we got him in a gay choir. He was in an adult gay choir so he got to be with all kinds of successful adults and find out that it's not all such a horror as far as the social aspect. That many people can be very successful and happy and well-adjusted. So all of that. . . .So you know he's come miles since he's done this program [self-help counselling] for himself. And also coming out and getting

> and coming into the community has really helped him a lot too. So he's just a lot calmer, you know, more present person since he's done both of those. I think those two things go hand-in-hand a lot.

As well, Reg and Debbie reported that their son, who had been previously depressed and suicidal, experienced much relief when he finally disclosed to them that he was gay. They commented,

> The stress that had to be on him playing the charades that he was playing. He could then drop all of that, he didn't have to tell us stories about, you know, he was going out with Denise . . . who was actually John [his partner]. . . . He's much happier, now that he's come out with us, and whoever he wants to come out with, the weight that's that has come off his shoulders. If other parents could experience, and I consider this a positive experience, to see your kid, see so much relief in such a short period of time.

Emotional Reactions to Disclosure

The second order theme, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, was also derived from the data. Within this theme, the parents explained the varying emotions that they experienced on hearing their children's disclosures or on realizing their children's homosexuality. The parents' reactions to the disclosures described vividly a wide range of emotions and feelings, such as fear, self-blame, relief, shock, and surprise. Also, other parents initially reacted negatively to the disclosures but soon their negative responses became more positive and accepting. As well, they discussed their feelings of loss with the possibility of not having grandchildren. Because the parents were concerned that their children had struggled alone for years with their homosexuality, the parents described feelings of regret over their children not disclosing sooner. The parents also had regrets over past intolerant behaviors.

Fears.

Following the children's disclosures of their homosexuality, five parents recounted feelings of fear as they were afraid of their children being stigmatized and discriminated against. After her daughter's disclosure, JoAnna experienced initial feelings of concern and fear over her daughter being stigmatized by society. She reported,

> But I had to deal with this, and I, I think what I had to deal with was the fact that like, what she had to go through all those years before she told me, you know, like I didn't know the extent of everything at that time. Like as even as far as getting an apartment with another person or, whatever, and obviously the work issue too. I mean I don't think she was ever out at work anywhere. So I had to think, and then I had to think, "Well, I kind of know what society is like," and I thought, "She's going to have such a hard time in life." That kind of thing.

Regarding her fears, concerns, and pain over her lesbian daughter being treated poorly or unfairly by society, Gillian stated,

> Even though I don't have any difficulty with how a person is [homosexual or heterosexual], it's not a problem. It never has been for me but it's the pain that you know they're going to go through, that's painful . . . other people's issues. How other people will treat them.

Dora was also worried and fearful about her son being gay as she indicated he was already being faced with discrimination as a result of his physical disability. She explained,

> I didn't want him to be gay, not because I feel gay is anything immoral or unnatural or anything to that effect, but I did know that socially it would cause him difficulties. And because of the fact that he was already so visibly different because of his handicap, I didn't think he needed another way to be a

> minority in which he's going to have to deal with all kinds of social issues. Because the handicap creates all kinds of social issues, and he has to build up so much personal strength because of that one, I thought, "Oh, God I hope not."

Additionally, two-parents were afraid for their children's safety or health. Reg and Debbie reported feelings of fear over their son's health, more specifically they worried about losing him to AIDS. Reg stated,

> And, it's not very easy to talk the talk, unless you've walked the walk, like I now know the fear that another father or mother have the first three days that their son or daughter comes out to them. And I can only express it is, you got to walk the walk to find it. And I can certainly try, my fear was "Oh my God, my son is going to die of AIDS." You know. That really was the first thing that came up, "How can we protect him"? You know, that was the fist thing again, "How do I know that he's going to be okay? How do I know he is Okay"?. And that was my fear. "By God, he's lived this long, and now we are going to lose him to AIDS." Because AIDS is certainly something to be concerned about. Until we kind of calmed down and you know, how time just mellows you out a little bit, and . . . education.

Susan also commented on her continued struggle to come to terms with her fears and uncertainty about her daughter's safety and happiness in a homophobic society.

> But like I said, I still have my times where it's a, like for an instance, and it's mostly when I talk about close times that I get emotional and stuff....I still want her to be safe. I still want her to have as normal a life as possible....and I just want her to be happy.

Self-Blame.

Initially after the disclosure, three parents acknowledged feelings of self-blame. They blamed themselves, birth control use, the absence of a parent, their spouse, the toys given to the children, or the sports the children played for their children's homosexuality. After her son disclosed that he was gay, Joan reported her initial reaction to the news as being one of self-blame.

> The first reaction was, "What did I do"? I said [to him], "What did I do wrong? Well, maybe it was something during your birth"? He said, "Mother, you didn't do a damn thing." So, I said, "Well, I was still on birth control when you were born." So yeah, I went through all this [blaming self].

Gillian also experienced feelings of self-blame as she questioned the origins of her daughter's homosexuality being related to her being a single parent. She explained,

> Well, I know this doesn't make any difference but when she first came out to me, I mean, I've never married. I've always been a single parent all my life, so I felt it was because she didn't have a father figure, right. Well, I mean, my brother was always around and he was always good to her and played hockey with her when he could have been out dating, because he's a good looking guy. And, so she remembers those things. And she told me it [being gay] had nothing to do with, with it [me being a single parent] at all. And I've come to realize that it did not. But at the time [that she disclosed], you have these guilty feelings and thoughts.

At times, Susan blamed herself and her husband for the fact that her daughter was gay. Also, Susan blamed the toys that her daughter had played with growing up and the sports in which she had participated for her daughter's homosexuality. Concerning her feelings of blame, Susan disclosed,

> For the longest time, I blamed her Dad because of the tough relationship they had. I blamed myself for . . . for silly things, like maybe not making her wear dresses more often, not curling her hair. She played ringette for eight or nine years and I thought well, maybe it's because she was in sports. I mean you go through silly things, silly things.

Another parent, Faye blamed herself for her son's painful struggle with coming to terms with his sexuality. After her son had disclosed, she stated her feelings of pain and anguish as follows:

> I mean I was crying but I was, I was not blaming him for anything, I just did not understand it, I guess. I don't know, I was crying, and I don't know whether it was so much pain over him being gay, but him having suffered for so long and this is, this is the pain I feel still, and I think that will always be with me, that I was so ignorant and I tried everything to provide for my children. When they were not well physically, when they had physical pain and whatever, I always was watching out, very much over my sons and, right away [they] were sent to the doctor. But he had so much emotional pain and I didn't realize it.

Relief.

In addition, three parents expressed feelings of relief after their children disclosed. They felt relief because now they knew the reason for their children's struggles and finally they better understood their children. Reg and Debbie described their feelings of relief when their son finally disclosed his sexuality to them. With his disclosure, came a new insight and understanding for both Reg and Debbie about their son's past suicidal and depressed behaviors. They reported,

> And that was a big relief [when he disclosed his homosexuality]. Because we lived in fear and when he lived at home, you always wondered when you turned the corner what you would find when you come home. . . .Even when

> he moved out, if we didn't hear from him every two days, we would panic. [So his coming out] was a relief. [Also his coming out was] an explanation to some of the reasons to why he was the way [depressed and suicidal] that he was there for a period of time. [We] had a lot of answers, questions answered [when he came out].

Additionally, Faye spent a lot of time trying to understand her son's depressed behaviors and his introverted personality. She acknowledged that she felt relief when her son disclosed that he was gay. She remembered the following:

> So I finally figured, "Well, I can't change him, that's the way he is. He's not a happy outgoing person. He is a very caring and a very compassionate person, and he's just the way he is." Then when he was 26, one day he set me down and, it wasn't even at home, it was at my work, and he said to me, "Mom, I have to tell you something". I sat down and he said, "Mom, I'm gay." And then of course like you have so many emotions, but the strongest one I remember is the feeling, "I finally know. I finally understood," like it finally gave me understanding of what was bothering him. It was almost a relief.

Additionally, Susan explained that her husband and their daughter had a difficult relationship for varying reasons. She reported that her husband had feelings of relief when their daughter disclosed that she was gay because he was afraid that she was going to announce her dislike for him. Regarding his feelings, Susan stated,

> One night, we have [property] east of the city, and we were sitting at the picnic table, . . . he [my husband] had a few drinks. My daughter's partner then had come out and they were camping with us, and we sat around drinking a little bit of wine and stuff like that and we were talking about how she came out. Her partner had a difficult time with her family, and all of a sudden, my husband got tears in his eyes. I said, "What are you thinking"? And he said, "When she first came out and told me that she was gay, I thought she was

going to tell me she hated me." So he knew, and he was very aware of the [difficult] relationship before that [her disclosure], so I think in a way it was a kind of relief to him.

Other reactions.

In addition to feelings of fear, self-blame, and relief, four parents experienced other feelings such as surprise and/or shock when their children disclosed. John seemed surprised at the news of his daughter's disclosure. He commented, "I was a slight surprised. . . .I certainly had to adjust to that but it wasn't a big shock. It was just an adjustment." Gary reported that he and his wife reacted with some shock to their son's disclosure, but overall he felt that they handled his son's news well. Regarding this, he explained,

> So I think we reacted in a normal manner with a little shock. Outrage is too strong, shocked, good acceptance and then okay how are we going to work this out so that it benefits everybody and it's not a negative process. We seemed to have gotten there. Maybe not?

Also, two-parents initially reacted negatively but then became supportive and accepting. Susan described her husband's initial negative reaction of disgust to their daughter's disclosure of her homosexuality. However, she explained that his negative reaction soon turned to that of support towards their daughter. This was evident as she recounted the incident.

> So she came over that afternoon and . . . he sat down and he said, "You have to come home" and he explained the finances and stuff. We had been paying some bills for her that she had been falling behind in. He said, "You have no choice but to move home." She said, "I'm not moving home. I can't move home." And he said, "Why not"? She said, "I just can't." And she said, "I can't tell you." . . . Ilooked at her and I said, "You have to tell Dad why you can't move back home, why you feel you can't move back home." I'm trying

to prod her into telling him. . . .I said, . . ."You can not say, no, you're not moving home, and we're paying your bills. You have to tell him why you won't come home." She just, . . . through the sobs, and quietly said, "I'm gay." And her Dad, right then, he stood up, and he stood in front of her and he said, "That is the most disgusting thing I have ever heard and you're disgusting"! And she just sobbed and he went upstairs and . . . I grabbed her. I held her until she calmed down a little bit. She got up, she went upstairs, put on her shoes, and she went home. I made sure she was okay. I went up into the kitchen and I stood in front of him and I didn't know what to say to him and I said, "You've got to deal with it". "You've got to deal with it," so I got ready and went to the concert. . . .When I got home, my husband had a few drinks. I didn't know what he had done, but my daughter called me at work the next day. I asked her if she was okay and she said, "Yeah, Dad called me last night." I said, "Did he"? She said, "Yeah." She said, "He said, I'm sorry." My husband never says he's sorry about anything. He said, "I'm sorry, you're my daughter and I love you anyway."

Another parent found the process of hearing the disclosure difficult despite being open-minded. Still, one of the other parents responded with unconditional love. For example, Joan explained that she did not care if her son was homosexual or heterosexual as she just loved her son. Regarding her response to her son's disclosure, she commented, "To tell you the honest truth, I don't care. I guess that's it. Everlasting love."

Loss of grandchildren.

After the disclosure, six parents experienced feelings of loss, sadness, or regret over the possibility of not having grandchildren. Such feelings of loss became evident as Dora described the following:

> But that's bringing it around to one of the costs that I feel of my son being gay to me. And that I won't have grandchildren. He's my only son. I'm a personality that I loved (working with children) . . . I work with children, I really would look forward to having grandchildren. It's a role different from parenting and I had a grandmother that mentored me in a way that I would love to be able to do for my grandchild. I won't be able to do that. I know I can be with other children but the actual physical bond that you get to have with a child that you get to spend that much time with is because they are your family . . . it's different from what you get to spend within any kind of a professional role or with friends' children or anything like that. So I'm sad about that. It's a loss and I'm not going to lose sleep over it or anything like that but I have cried in the past about it. It's a fact . . . so that part of it is a sadness to me.

On learning the news that her daughter was gay, Gillian also experienced a sense of loss over not having grandchildren and over not participating in the traditions that are celebrated with heterosexuality. She described her feelings.

> Then I said, "You know my daughter is gay and I haven't known for very long and you have to realize that there's a lot of grief that you go through because you're not going to have grandchildren probably." Today who knows? Probably aren't going to have any grandchildren from your daughter and you're not probably going to have a wedding you know and you're not going to do some of those things. So those milestones aren't going to be there for you and there's some grieving that goes with that.

Additionally, JoAnna reported that she did not even realize that she had expectations for her daughter's life until she heard the news that her daughter was gay. After her daughter's disclosure, JoAnna realized that she had always hoped that her

daughter would get married and have children. She explained her feelings of sadness and loss.

> Except I did have one bit of problem with myself [when daughter disclosed], that was totally selfish, but I was thinking how nice it would have been to have grandchildren. And I mean that could still happen. I don't know that. But at the time I felt, you know, I just wanted grandchildren and I'd go out through the stores, baby clothes and I'd be having tears running down my face, like it was really silly. Really silly. And I mean I'm over that now, but I think that was the only problem [that she had when her daughter disclosed]. I guess . . . if you have a child you like to think they're going to grow up and get married, and have family and you know, those kind of things, so I guess I probably had those kinds of dreams. I wasn't really conscious of them till she told me that she was gay, then I thought, "Oh, poor me, I'm not going to have any grandchildren."

Also, Reg, commented that he felt pain and hurt for himself when his son disclosed his homosexuality because he felt that his son would not be having children. He stated to his son, "Now that you're gay that means I'm not going to be a grampa to you. And at the time that was one thing that hurt."

Regrets.

Interestingly, five parents acknowledged having feelings of regret over their children not disclosing earlier to them which may have added to their children's painful struggles. For example, Gary had regrets over his son not disclosing sooner as he imagined that his son had a long and difficult year trying to cope with his struggle by himself. Regarding this, Gary explained,

> I think knowing now what he was going through for probably a year prior to telling us or not telling us or us finding out. If he had said something or done something in between or tried or had someone intercede for him to come and

see us, it probably would have been easier for him. That was a long, I think, I haven't asked him this but I think it was an extremely long year. After he was quite sure he was gay and before he could tell anybody and before we found out and before he could tell us, that was a long year.

Also, Gillian worried that her daughter may have struggled with her homosexuality alone. Gillian wondered why she could not have disclosed earlier as Gillian perceived herself to be very open-minded around this issue. She reported,

> If she was going through times that she was struggling with this and couldn't talk to me, I wish I could've helped her with it, I guess. Maybe she didn't, but I mean at some point she must have. I guess I don't know. So it must be really hard to talk about, because even though she knew already my position, she still had to wait awhile to tell me, but I don't know how long that period was.

Another mother, Faye, also struggled with her regrets over her son not disclosing to her sooner. Her regrets created a feeling of failure within her as if she had failed her son in some way. She stated, "It pained me that I, and . . . that is a big pain I have now, because I feel I let him down, that he didn't come earlier to me. I failed him." Also, JoAnna believed that her daughter must have found it difficult to hide her homosexuality. JoAnna felt regret over her daughter not being able to share this part of herself with her mother. JoAnna described her feelings as follows:

> Well it's just that, there was always that one thing that, that she had to keep from me. Like normally we could talk about "Oh, what did you do this weekend? Oh, you know, whatever." But, if she went to a gay bar or went out with her friends dancing, I mean, that was, she couldn't tell me that because she hadn't come out to me. So there was always this, she didn't really lie but she didn't really, she couldn't tell me the truth. And that must have been hard on her.

Also, half of the parents had regrets over their past intolerant behaviors or comments and regretted that they had not been gay positive in the past. For example, Bob experienced both shame and embarrassment as he reflected on the intolerant comments that he had made over the years about gay and lesbian issues. He stated,

> And I usually try and clean up the dishes after Joan does the cooking and supper, and so I was standing at the sink when she was talking to him, and so she says, [to our son] "You're not gay are you"? or I don't know, I forget the exact question. "You are"! And I, and I can remember almost, almost collapsing on the, on the floor. I think it was from sheer embarrassment, and shame with what I had, you know, the comments that I had made over the years. And those had been directed at [my son] obviously, not knowing at the time. But he must have winced every time I spoke about those kinds of things.

Additionally, Faye lamented that she and her family had not been gay positive. She believed if they had spoken openly and positively about homosexuality, her son may not have struggled with his sexuality.

> What I would change most definitely, I would talk about homosexuality, and it is okay to be homosexual. I could not force him to tell me that he's homosexual. But I think if our home would have been a home where it's talked about, homosexuality, and there's nothing wrong with the person, this is not a black mark on a person but sexual orientation is just what it is, and being gay positive, I'm sure I could have made my son's adolescent years a lot easier and that's one thing. You know, I feel like, he wasted so many years of his life, he wasn't living, he was just existing.

Two of the parents had regrets over not having a positive male role model, or over financial instability in the family. One set of parents had regrets over actions that they did or did not take regarding their child. For example, John and Elizabeth

struggled with regrets over actions that they took or did not take with their daughter. John reported,

> Well part of the question is how would you change it. Because I mean, I certainly would have liked to have a closer, or more time with her when she was much younger, instead of the early teenager or even before, but how, how that would have been achieved I don't know cause if it doesn't come when you try, then you obviously don't want to impose. I thought she should have, she should have more help through those years, and but somehow it didn't happen and, not because we didn't want to give it, but because we didn't know how I think.

Shifting Towards Acceptance

After the parents expressed their varying emotions that they had experienced following their children's disclosures or after their realizations of their children's homosexuality, there seemed to be a shift in the parents' process. This shifting process became evident as the interviews of the parents were analyzed, thus resulting in the third second order theme, Shifting Towards Acceptance. This shifting involved the parents moving from a place of initial raw emotional reactions to a place where they began to understand and to accept their children's homosexuality. As a result of this shifting process, the parents commented that their children's disclosures provided them with insight into understanding their children's past behaviors. Additionally, the parents reported self-growth as they gained increased tolerance of others' differences. The parents also acknowledged that their relationship with their children became stronger following their disclosures. This shifting process resulted in both the parents and their children continuing to move forward, accepting their differences, and thus creating stronger parent-child dyads.

Insight into the child.

As a result of their children disclosing their homosexuality, four parents gained insight in to their children's past behaviors (i.e., being unhappy and suicidal) or developed a deeper understanding of their children. After their son disclosed, Reg and Debbie gained new insight into his past behaviors. For instance, Debbie stated,

> One time he had, he went with this girl, and when he broke up with her, I didn't understand it at the time. But, he said to me in a real, like a panic voice, you know, "I had to break up because if I didn't I would have married her". And there was really panic behind that comment. . . .And I couldn't understand it, but of course I understand it now.

Also, Susan believed that she understood more fully her daughter's past behaviors after her daughter disclosed that she was gay. Susan explained, "She's very strong-minded, very secretive, now that I look back she was very secretive. Now I know why."

Tolerance and self-growth.

Following the disclosures, three parents experienced self-growth as they became more tolerant and accepting of their children and also of the differences in others. After their son disclosed his homosexuality, both Bob and Joan stated that they went through a growing process becoming more tolerant to the differences of others. Regarding their increased tolerance and self-growth, Bob explained,

> So, and I'd heard parents in PFLAG talk about the son that they knew, was gone and they had a new son. But I think actually, in this case, hopefully, Jonathan feels he's got a new father. A little more understanding than, and . . . not so critical. More more tolerant of different races, it's a package deal. I don't think you can be understanding about one thing and not about others. . . So you mature so that you can be more, more understanding of pretty well everything. . . .And as we look back on it, our son didn't need much

> improvement there, he already had that. It was, it was me that was reborn that night, I guess. . . .We had to grow up, and deal with it ourselves. He had already, he had already done it, and you know, he'd come the first mile so, it was up to us to do the rest.

Additionally, both Reg and Debbie believed that they went through a growing process after their son disclosed his sexuality. Debbie asserted that such self-growth contributed to her becoming a more loving and understanding person. Debbie commented on this growing process,

> And there was another comment he made to me too, and he said that I had said something [homophobic comment] years ago, but then he's also, at first he was a bit offensive of it all but, as time has gone on he's had, he's grown to realize that we had to grow as well and we had to learn. I spent a lot of time with him after we found out [he was gay], because I just had to, I had to know everything, I was just. . . .But I did and we talked a lot and I asked a lot of questions, in fact, his partner said to him, "Boy, your mom asks a lot of questions." . . . And being involved in understanding a minority group has made me a much better person. A much more loving, understanding person, tolerance of all aspects of life.

Stronger parent-child relationship.

Six parents recounted that their relationships with their children became even closer following the disclosures. For example, JoAnna believed that her relationship with her daughter grew closer following her disclosure. She explained,

> After she came out, well, as far as I know there aren't any secrets, like she can tell me if she went out dancing, or you know, what they did, or if they whatever, now. You know, and that's, I guess that just brought us closer because there's no, no secrets, no nothing, nothing that you can't really say.

> There's nothing we couldn't say to each other. . . .So, you know, I felt it [our relationship] was a lot closer after she came out.

After their son's disclosure, both Bob and Joan reported that their relationship improved as they became more open and tolerant of individual differences. They commented on this process as follows:

> Oh, I think it [their relationship with their son] got better [after his disclosure]. . . . Oh much better actually, and I think it's, it comes with our open, opening up, to situations. Because he has always been very open. He's always appreciated art and music, a wide variety of music. And so I think we've grown considerably on that, and so, of course growing closer to him through that process.

Additionally, Susan revealed that her relationship with her daughter grew stronger as a result of her daughter's disclosure. Their stronger mother-daughter relationship became evident as Susan stated,

> Well, she lives at home, so we're in contact all the time. Our relationship now is probably better than it's ever been. She's more open, more honest, she's very outgoing, she's very upbeat, she's very affectionate. . . .She communicates really well, she never did before. Superficially she would communicate, the basic, but nothing intimate like friendships and stuff like that. So, we know everything now. We actually socialize quite a bit now, we'll go out for dinners or for movies and stuff like that. I've met a lot of her friends, and it seems to make things better. For her, she enjoys it when I go out with her, and meet all her friends and stuff. Yeah, our relationship has blossomed a lot [since her disclosure].

Also, Dora continued to have a close relationship with her son following his disclosure. But she explained that after he came out, their relationship changed as her

focus of support shifted from his disability to his homosexuality. Regarding this process of change, she stated,

> It's changed our relationship in the sense that it's changed the focus of my attention and how I offer him support. My advocacy for him used to be related to his handicap when he was young . . . and I did a lot of educational things in relationship to the larger community and the professionals at that time. And now the focus of my attention and my support for him is in the gay area. Working in the youth group and trying to have, like getting wider public in the school system to be a more hospitable place for all gay people, so I've gotten very involved with gay people and gay youth specifically. So in that sense it changes my relationship, it has changed our relationship and my relationship to the larger world, because now I always feel so obligated because the need is there, and if the need is there I end up becoming engaged with it.

Moving forward.

Eight parents mentioned various factors that aided their increased understanding and acceptance of their gay children. For example, two-parents believed that having greater exposure to gay couples and gay people (i.e., child's partner) increased their understanding and acceptance of homosexuality. Two parents commented that their understanding of their children's sexuality was aided by their unconditional love for their children. For instance, Joan did not struggle with her son's homosexuality when he disclosed. She seemed to accept her son's homosexuality as a result of her unconditional love for him. This was apparent as she described, "So I mean it wasn't, actually I think it [accepting her son's homosexuality] was easier for me, because I just told Bob [my husband], 'I love him, and don't care where it takes me' and that was, and that was the way it went."

Seven parents found attending or meeting with people from PFLAG or talking with other parents' of gay children helpful in increasing their understanding and acceptance of their children's sexuality. When Gary and his wife realized that their son was gay, they found meeting with a PFLAG member useful in answering their questions.

> Well, we did [meet with someone from PFLAG]. We had a very nice meeting with the lady from the PFLAG organization when he wouldn't talk to us, because he didn't want to have to answer, didn't know how to answer the questions that we might have, so we had a nice meeting with the PFLAG people and got most of our concerns answered along with his answers and along with the lady from PFLAG's answers.

Also, JoAnna stated that she attended PFLAG meetings because they were very helpful. Specifically, she described that she enjoyed talking with other parents of gays and lesbians.

> Well, I, I found it [PFLAG] helpful to talk to other parents, yes I did. Although I didn't have a big, an issue with it [my daughter's homosexuality], I just had to get used to the idea. Because I wasn't prejudice or anything like that, but it's been, it was really helpful to talk to parents.

Although Gillian did not attend PFLAG, she did find talking to other parents of gay children beneficial. She stated,

> I did meet a lady through work whose daughter is gay so her and I have sat and talked about it. She had known since her daughter was in her teen years. So she's had a lot longer and has joined her in the gay march parades and things like that. Has been very supportive of her daughter, so we've had an opportunity to talk,. . . so it is nice to know somebody just to talk to.

Four of the parents found reading educational materials about gay and lesbian issues helpful. Also, two-parents reported that talking to their gay and lesbian

children aided their understanding and acceptance of their children's homosexuality. For instance, Faye educated herself about gay issues by talking to her son, reading educational materials, and making contact with PFLAG. Regarding her educational process, she stated,

> So I went out and I got some books, bought two books. Read about it [homosexuality]. And, to understand it. I have to say my son was very helpful too. He was willing to answer any questions I had. And we went through that and he got me in contact with PFLAG. By the time I went to the first meeting it was almost three months later, because he had just told me before the summer break, when they don't have meetings. By the time I went, I was perfectly comfortable with my son's sexuality. I, after reading the two books, it gave me an understanding of it. Because I was totally ignorant of what it was about. I only knew what people said in bad jokes, that was more or less all the education I had about it. Which wasn't positive or a good one. So after reading the books, I understood it more.

Still other factors, which were expressed by two-parents as aiding their understanding and acceptance of their children's homosexuality, involved talking to professionals or other family members. After his son disclosed, Bob found talking with a professional, his family physician, aided his acceptance of his son's sexuality. His physician challenged Bob's intolerance and encouraged him to refocus his energy in supporting his son. Regarding this meeting, Bob explained,

> And, shortly after that [my son's disclosure], I made an appointment with the doctor, thinking I needed counselling. Well, he put me straight there very quickly, he said, "My god. Who do you think has been going through this all of his life, your son. All you've got to do is go home, and show him your love and understanding, and lavish that on him, and you'll grow out of it very

quickly. Think of him. . . .Quit thinking of yourself. Think of him." And that was the best counselling I could have received.

Interestingly, one set of parents believed their faith in God and their involvement in their church aided them in coming to understand and to accept their gay child. Additionally, three parents believed that their backgrounds and past experiences were helpful; whereas, two-parents stated that watching their children's struggles with depression and suicidal ideation aided their understanding and acceptance of their children's homosexuality. Gillian's past experiences of working with gay and lesbians and also having homosexual friends helped her in accepting her own daughter's sexuality. Regarding her past experiences with gays and lesbians, Gillian commented,

> She was going to school in [city] and it was not a secret that one of the guys there was gay, and everybody was open about that. It wasn't a problem. I don't think any of that was a problem for her to ever discuss with me either, because I had worked in the hotel industry and there were people in the hotel industry, men, who are gay. One of them was a good friend so she had some exposure to that and knew my reaction to that, and then I also worked on a suicide crisis line and there were also several males identified males who were homosexual in that program, so she heard me probably make some comments and later I worked at an organization and also then there were some females [lesbians]. So she certainly had heard me talk about it [homosexuality] and knew that I didn't have any bias about it.

Finally, Reg watched his son struggle with both depression and suicide. Reg believed that his son's struggles with depression and suicide were related to his son coming to terms with his sexuality. Watching his son's suffering aided Reg in coming to accept his son's homosexuality. This was evident as Reg explained,

> Like I guess the old story is that people are afraid of what they don't know. And of course, up until several years ago, tell me how many positive things you saw on television, or you heard on the radio, or you read in the paper about gay or lesbians? It used to be a criminal offense in Canada to be a gay or a lesbian. So the old school, that includes my generation, . . . this was not the most popular thing. . . .But that's that's exactly the mentality that a lot of people had. . . .Until people see the struggle and the pain that's in these kids and realize it's not right. There is no need for that. You know? So it's just a different twist to life, but they're entitled to the same rights, and I didn't always believe this.

Acts of Acceptance

The fourth second order theme which developed from the data was Acts of Acceptance. Within this core theme, the parents described the many ways that they embraced and accepted their gay or lesbian children. Also, the parents discussed their proactive efforts in supporting gay and lesbian issues. Based on their experiences of coming to terms and accepting their children's sexuality, they described their advice to other parents that may have gay or lesbian children and to children and teenagers who may be struggling to disclose. Additionally, the parents indicated their acceptance of their homosexual children by disclosing to other people.

Embracing acceptance.

All of the parents interviewed for this study seemed to have arrived at some level of acceptance with regard to their children being gay. Their acceptance seemed evident in the following ways: accepting and supporting their gay children and partners, being happy for their gay children's meaningful relationships and their happiness, and treating their homosexual children the same way that they treat their heterosexual children. For example, John and Elizabeth were accepting of their daughter's sexuality as well as her relationships, as both their daughter and her partner

have stayed with John and Elizabeth on occasion. Regarding their acceptance and support, John explained, "I said strongly accepting [of her partner]. But yeah, I mean she is a charming girl. And once it was clear that it was important to my daughter, that was, that's all we needed really."

Sandra showed her acceptance for her daughter and her same-sex relationship by celebrating the news of the relationship with her daughter. She stated,

> I don't believe the relationship changed between us when she disclosed she was lesbian. She and I were talking on the telephone about her week at university and what she had been doing. She was very happy and excited and said that the reason she was so happy was because she was having this incredible, wonderful, fulfilling relationship with someone. . . .I was thrilled for her. . . .It didn't matter to me that she was in a loving relationship with a girl. It only mattered that she was happy.

As stated previously, another indication of acceptance involved the parents embracing their homosexual children by treating the children the same way that they treat their heterosexual children. By treating all of her children (heterosexual and homosexual) similarly, Faye exemplified her full acceptance of her gay son. Regarding this, she explained,

> Like it's something we fully accept, his partner, he's come to the house and, you know, he gets a hug and a kiss from my husband and from me. . . .It's fully accepted. . . .They don't have to pretend like they're just friends, if they hold hands or whatever, or give each other a kiss it's perfectly all right. . . Like, it's no different as it is with our heterosexual son, we don't treat them differently. . . .We don't treat them differently, like it's as accepted for our homosexual son as we accept if from our heterosexual son to show their affection to, for their partners.

Also, parents showed their acceptance of their gay and lesbian children by experiencing the pain of a break-up between their homosexual children and their partners similarly to the pain experienced when a heterosexual marriage breaks up. For an example of such acceptance, Debbie described her and her husband's feelings when their gay son's relationship ended as follows:

> That was, it [the break up] was difficult at first. It's like any, was like any marriage break up, any you know. . . .But that's what we discovered, that we're, that we've got just as much enjoyment out of their relationship [gay son and his partner's] as we have our other children and their married spouses.

Additional signs of parental acceptance involved the parents appreciating their children's choices in same-sex partners and recognizing the benefits of same-sex relationships. This was evident as Susan reported,

> Any partner she's had since she came out that she has introduced us to, and one or two of them have become a close part of our family. She has got great taste. At one point I told her, we were kidding around . . . and I don't know, I must have been ticked off at my husband or something, and I said, "I don't blame you [for being in a relationship with a woman] Way to go"! Women are so much more emotional, compassionate, intuitive. . . .We always have that bond with other women, and I understood it. Yeah, I understood it. . . The sexuality and stuff, I even understand that because we can sit back and admire other women, and it's okay for us to say, "Well, she's beautiful," or "She's got a gorgeous body" or "She looks good in a bathing suit, looks nice in a gown." For men, it's not the same. It's just not the same. So, . . .I can kind of understand.

Dora also showed her acceptance of her child's homosexuality by recognizing and appreciating the benefits of being a part of the gay community. Regarding this, she explained,

> I guess one aspect of my son being gay is . . . there is a positive to me in that being a part of a minority sometimes can be a positive thing in a sense that there is an identity there and one that can be fostered in a really positive way so that . . . community. That's positive and they've really welcomed me into it as well. So I like that a great deal. It's like a family to me in many ways to me as well.

JoAnna also believed that her acceptance of her lesbian daughter led her to new and exciting experiences. She reported,

> And the neat thing with her being gay, I mean, I don't know if it's the neat thing, but if you accept your child for who they are, I mean, gee you get invited places you'd never would be. You learn all kinds of neat things. . . I've had all kinds of neat experiences, I've had the experiences since she's been gay, because I'd been to places and met people and gone places I never would be invited had I not accepted her. . . .So that's what I find really neat. I tell people, I wouldn't have missed this for anything.

Proactive parents.

Six of the parents showed their acceptance of homosexuality through their proactive efforts. Regarding this proactiveness, three parents indicated that if their friends, family members, strangers, or institutions rejected their gay children, then they were also rejecting themselves as parents and the parents would not tolerate such homophobia. For example, Faye stated that she would reject anyone who rejected her son.

> I told my sister and my brother. And I have been very outspoken about it. I would break with everybody but my son. . . .Anybody that doesn't accept him, I will, would shut out of my life. Like I would always always stand 100% with my son. Like his sexual orientation is not a trademark of his to speak of being bad or a good person. So, religion or, any of the family members

> condemning him or anything, it's not an issue and I mean, shortly after, . . . I took a risk there, . . . I didn't care once there would be negative things happening to me because I thought that my son needs my 100% approval, I shouldn't say approval, 100% support right. And knowing that I'm not, just saying that it's okay but I have to show him it is okay. And, I will, I would fight for him no matter what.

Also, Gillian made it very clear to her future husband that if he did not accept gays and lesbians, they had no future as her lesbian daughter was her priority. Regarding this, Gillian stated,

> And that was okay, . . . because I was really clear with him that this is my daughter, she's always going to be a part of my life and there's no discussion, and there's no room for discussion about that. . . .No, there's no debate.

Also, six parents were involved in educating others about gay and lesbian issues by expressing their intolerance of gay jokes or other expressions of homophobia. For example, Reg participated in the present study as he hoped the results would be educational for others and have a positive impact. He commented,

> Well, Debbie has wondered if I was, happy to have you come in here and do it [the research interview]. And have this talk with us. And I have always been positive about it ever since I heard you were coming. Because the more information you gather, I mean, we're only one piece of it, and maybe we are a [one piece] that fits into the puzzle, and it's never really been looked at, you know, it's been a taboo thing and it's just coming to where I don't know if you can call it socially acceptable yet, but it's coming to where, it's not a curse anymore, and people need true honest information, and whatever the results are of this, it's honest, you know. And it's, I have faith that it's going to turn around and be positive. That's why I'm doing it [participating in this study]. . . Well, honestly I can say, I hope that this will save lives.

Sandra made no apologies for her proactive efforts. She would not tolerate homophobia as she explained,

> I don't accept jokes which are poor in taste regarding the subject, and my friends and acquaintances know that about me right from the start. I think that my being forthright about my feelings in this matter saves "face" for people . . if they don't like it, they can stay away from the subject. If they are curious, I am pleased to talk about it.

Advising others.

The parents who were interviewed gave important advice to other parents who may have children who are homosexual. For example, eight parents asserted that other potential parents must continue to love and to support their children. They saw this advice as essential. This was evident as Susan explained,

> Well that comes back to, love them. Just to love them above all else. You may be hurting inside yourself a lot, and that's something that you're going to have to deal with, but your child has to know that you love them . . . no matter what. They're not ax murderers . . . they're just people, and they're only doing what they have to do. They don't have a choice, and you have to admire them for having to deal with something so different, and just be there for them. The only advice I can give is to never ever stop telling that you love them. Never stop showing them that you love them. Try and be as open as you can about it. Try to talk to them as much as you can about it, . . . just to know that you're interested in their lives.

Also, four parents suggested that other parents must be tolerant, open, and honest with their gay children. For instance, Bob discussed the importance of being both open and tolerant.

> There's a lot of early separations of young people from their families, it's just this fact that they don't feel support and tolerance within their own family, to

> grow in there and be supported, to be supported as they get through their various stages. . . . If a parent, if parents are more tolerant, then the children will be prepared to stay with them longer. Gain strength and confidence, so that they can handle the real world situation when they do go.

Regarding advising parents to be tolerant and open to differences, Reg described the consequences of intolerant behaviors of parents as follows:

> So if you are prepared to lose your son or daughter, be close-minded. Because all they needed was that little push to get them going. They already thought about it [suicide]. Some have already taken some action towards it, now, "How's my parent going to accept this."? They're dirt if they're treated as dirt. "Oh hey, I love you but get the hell out of the house." Yeah, it shows how much you love, or "Don't touch me." You know, things like that, that shows love, . . . actions speak louder than words. And if you're prepared to lose your kids, I guess that's your actions.

Earlier in the "Moving Forward" section of the third second order theme, Shifting Towards Acceptance, these parents described the importance of educating themselves about homosexuality by reading, by talking to their gay children and by sharing with others through support groups. These parents found such steps significant in aiding their increased understanding and acceptance of their gay children. Not surprisingly, four parents advised other parents who may have gay or lesbian children to take these same steps.

Additionally, two-parents advised other parents to always remember that their children are still the same even after the disclosures. For example, Gary explained,

> Well, I think the easiest one is it's still the same child it was yesterday, it's just today. But yesterday and today are two different days. The person hasn't changed, he's still the same guy he was yesterday, he's just now has told us that he's gay. There's a little slight to it, but it's not the end of the world. It's

> not something that gets into the "Gee, I'm glad you told me that but now you have to leave the house, we don't want to talk to you for the rest of your life." It's not, to me it's not that mindbending. It's a little bit of a bend to get around it but it's not that mindbending, and I don't think that relationship has changed. I treat him sort of in the same manner as we had before. That's probably the easiest way to do it. His mental outlook hasn't changed on the rest of us, towards the rest of his family . . . no there's been no change in that so that stayed the same. Just that he's gay. Well, fine, he's gay. I've known other people that have been gay before.

Additionally, all of the parents in this study gave advice to any teenagers or young adults who may be trying to disclose their homosexuality to their parents. Six parents advised the children to have other support prior to disclosing to their parents and not to be emotionally or financially dependent on their parents when disclosing. This was evident as Dora explained,

> My advice is first of all evaluate what your relationship is with your parents in general. . . .I would suggest that it's not necessarily a wise thing to come out if you don't have a supportive relationship already in all other ways. That you're reliant on your parents for food and your housing and it's really important for you to be able to develop as many skills as you can while you are at home and some of that is schooling. If you have a reasonable relationship with your family, I think it's best to have them help you come to terms with yourself. If you've got a good relationship already, then they probably would feel closer to you that you would share something like that. Then I suggest you come out because they can help you. If your relationship isn't a good one in many other ways, then there are other people that can help you and you need that help and you deserve that help. And you deserve to feel good about yourself but you also need to be safe.

Also, five parents stressed the importance of evaluating the parents' potential reactions prior to disclosing, but also to realize that there is a certain amount of uncertainty about how they will react. For example, Faye described this uncertainty as follows:

> So what I have to say is that there is no guarantee how your parents will react to it. Some parents you would think they would hit the roof, knowing my husband, who is very very redneck. He surprised us all by how well he took it. How accepting he is of it. But you cannot, you never know how parents will be reacting, like you think they're very liberal and then, the world ends for them, they cannot accept their children. So you cannot tell, unfortunately I cannot say to any other person that wants to come out, "It's okay go ahead do it, it will be fine." . . . It is not always fine.

Additionally, four of the parents recommended that young people disclose their sexuality to their parents so they can honestly be themselves. Susan described the importance of gay children being true to themselves.

> It's going to be difficult [disclosing to parents]. It's going to be really difficult, and sometimes maybe impossible, but you have to be true to yourself. I can't imagine . . . turning your back on your child. I can't imagine people doing that. There are people who do that. I don't understand. But I would just tell them [gay young people] . . . and if they're old enough, like 18, whatever and they still haven't come out to their parents, they're old enough to know who they are. If they want to deal with that . . . if they want to have a normal life they have to include their family. They have to . . . whether they accept them or not, is something they are going to have to deal with it. They're going to have to find help to deal with that. However, I think it's important for them to all come out. I really think it's important.

Also, four of the parents advised children, who were trying to disclose their homosexuality to their parents, to follow such recommendations as disclose in a nonthreatening manner, educate their parents, expect the worst, and give their parents time to adjust to the news. Regarding such advice, Faye described,

> The first thing I would say is, get well prepared for how you tell your parents. Have, give your parents a grace time to come to terms with it. Some are easier to come to terms than others. Get information for them, especially when you know that your parents are kind of ignorant to this issue, not like, as I, we were. . . .Get, have some information ready for them . . . that one can read up on it, because education we have is a negative one.

Disclosing to others.

Another indication that parents have accepted their gay and lesbian children seemed to be related to disclosing to other people. Five of the parents spoke of the importance, albeit difficulty, of disclosing to others, especially extended family. Susan believed that she needed to disclose to her extended family; however, she acknowledged that not everyone needed to know. For example, she stated,

> If somebody was to say to me you know, "Has [your daughter] got a boyfriend now" or just something related to that, I would say, "No, she has a partner, she has a girlfriend," if I thought that was necessary. If she had a partner that had been a part of the family for a long time, we took family pictures . . . she was in there. If I felt I had to explain that, I would. I'm not afraid to anymore, but like I said, I don't feel the need to come out to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that we run into. . . .I know there are certain expectations when they reach a certain age that they start dating seriously, and you know, I think especially grandparents and if you have immediate family living around you, surrounding you that maybe it's important that they know that not to expect certain things. That it's not going to happen. This is why she doesn't have a

boyfriend, and that when she does bring a girlfriend to a family gathering whatever, then you accept that. If you don't like it, then don't show up. So that was the most difficult part for me was coming out to the family.

Also, three of the parents discussed their extended families' reactions. JoAnna described disclosing her daughter's sexuality to her elderly father.

My dad was here visiting, . . . and he was like 80 something, and my daughter hadn't come out to him, but she said I could tell him if I wanted to so. And I just wanted to tell him for some reason . . . and like I was a little bit nervous about it, . . . So we were sitting there eating these basket of french fries or something, and I finally just asked him what his views were on homosexuality. So, I mean my dad's from way back the old school, he said, well, he didn't know anything about it, but you know, some people were and whatever. So I told him that my daughter was, and he said, "Oh well, I can give her a hug like, you know, like I always did." So that's really emotional for me. . . .But sometimes I can tell this story without getting emotional, and other times it's like I could just shake people, because if they could just be more accepting like my dad was. . . .And he's like going to be 80 something this year.

One set of parents also discussed how disclosing to others was an important, yet private issue for the gay child to decide to whom to disclose. Bob and Joan explained that they only disclosed to others with their son's permission. This became evident as Joan explained,

But he [our son] worried about the extended family, like I've told my siblings and of course, his [Bob's] family I'm not, they are very straight laced, you know, they came from that type of background. Bob got the great idea that maybe we should tell them. And oh, he [our son] was just sick about it. And I said, "Oh no, I'll tell him not to." But we never ever tell anybody without his

> permission. . . .And there was something I'd read in the book too, and other gays have told me too that it's [disclosing is] something that's very personal, and until you're ready to let that out, it's their business, you know, and to respect that.

However, Sandra advised parents to disclose their children's sexuality to others. She believed that if parents are truly happy for their gay children, then others will react more positively. She stated her feelings as follows:

> Be happy for them. Be supportive, fun, accepting, and love them to death. Alternate lifestyles are always a harder road. Your child and his or her love will need your acceptance and support more than ever. Your attitude will really determine people's reactions to it. Tell your family, relations, guests, pave the way for them to be accepting of your child and partner by being happy about it yourself. When or if people make negative comments bring them to the positive side if you can. They may not agree that it is a good choice for your child but it isn't important whether they agree or not. The important thing is that you are happy for your child and you love and accept them and their partner in life as a positive contribution to your life. Be proud of them as a unit . . . it takes guts to be different.

Summary of Parents' Common Themes

As a result of the process of data analysis, the four second order themes were derived as core markers of the parents' experiences of their relationship with their gay and lesbian adult children from adolescence to the present. Although these parents had individually unique stories, collectively they shared key common themes which emerged from their experiences of the parent-child relationship. The four second order themes which developed from the interviews with the parents seemed to represent a four phase process.

The first phase of this process involved Witnessing the Coming Out. Within this stage, the parents observed their children's experiences of growing up, struggling, and coming to terms with their homosexuality. Within this first phase, the parents witnessed their children's painful struggles, specifically during adolescence, with coming to terms with their sexuality. In particular, five parents indicated that their children had struggled with depression. Four parents reported that their children had suicidal ideation, with two-parents reporting suicide attempts. Specifically, regarding the male children, four of the parents disclosed that their sons had struggled with depression; three parents indicated that their sons had suicidal ideation during adolescence, with one son attempting suicide. The parents believed that their sons' struggles with depression and suicidal ideation was partly or fully related to their struggles with their sexuality. In comparison, three parents recounted that their female children experienced a negative period during adolescence. However, for only one daughter was this negative period characterized by depression and a suicide attempt. This negative period for two daughters involved being withdrawn, temperamental, having a distant relationship with parents, being rebellious, secretive, and deceitful. These parents believed that this negative period was partially or fully related to their daughters coming to terms with her sexuality.

Within this first phase, the parents also observed the children's preparation for disclosure which involved witnessing their children's fears, reasons, and hints about disclosing. Two of the parents recounted that they had no idea that their children were gay. Three parents reported missing signs or hints; four parents stated that they had received mixed messages about their children's sexuality. Also, two-parents recognized the hints and suspected that their children were gay. As well, a shifting process in the children was noted as they resolved their struggles with their sexuality and accepted their homosexuality. This shifting process involved the children moving from a dark and painful place to one of self-acceptance. Five parents

believed that their love, support, and acceptance aided their children's movement towards acceptance. Other helpful factors that were acknowledged included the following: friends' support, professional counselling, self-help counselling programs, participating in exercise, artwork, and having a sense of humor.

The second phase of the parents' experiences was Emotional Reactions to Disclosure. Within this second phase, the parents recounted the varying emotions and feelings that they experienced when they realized their children were gay or when their children disclosed. Regarding their emotions, five of the parents recounted experiencing feelings of fear that their children would be discriminated against. Additionally, feelings of self-blame, relief, surprise, and shock were acknowledged. Two parents initially reacted negatively but soon after became supportive and accepting. Also, six parents acknowledged feelings of loss with the possibility of not having grandchildren and five parents recounted feelings of regret that their children had not disclosed earlier.

Shifting Towards Acceptance was the third second order theme or the third phase of the parents' process. This shifting involved the parents moving from a place of initial raw emotional reactions to a place where they began to understand and to accept their children's homosexuality. As a result of this shifting process, four parents commented that their children's disclosures provided them with insight into understanding their children's past behaviors. Additionally, three parents reported that they experienced self-growth as they became more tolerant of others' differences. As well six parents stated that their relationships with their gay children grew even stronger following their disclosures. This shifting process resulted in eight of the parents acknowledging key factors and actions that aided their increased understanding and acceptance of their gay children, such as their exposure to gay people, their unconditional love of their children, educating themselves on the issues, talking to professionals and other family members, their faith in God, their past

experiences, and watching their children struggle with depression and suicidal ideation in the past.

Acts of Acceptance was the fourth phase of the parents' process and it comprised ways that the parents embraced and accepted their gay and lesbian children. All of the parents who were interviewed had arrived at some level of acceptance about their children's homosexuality. Their acceptance was demonstrated in various ways, such as being happy for their gay children's meaningful relationships, experiencing the pain of a break up between their gay children and their partners similarly to the pain experienced when a heterosexual couple breaks up, appreciating children's choices in partners, and recognizing the benefits of same-sex relationships and of having a gay child. Also, within this third phase, six of the parents described their proactive efforts in supporting gay and lesbian issues, such as educating others and not tolerating homophobia.

Based on the parents' experiences of coming to terms and accepting their children's homosexuality, they asserted their advice to other parents who may have gay or lesbian children who are trying to disclose. For example, eight of the parents advised other parents who may have gay children to continue to love and to support the children. Other advice that was given included to be tolerant, to be open and honest with the children, to educate themselves by reading, asking their children questions, or joining PFLAG or other support groups, and to remember that their gay children are still the same people after their disclosures. Additionally, the parents expressed their advice to any children who may be trying to disclose to their parents. Regarding this, six parents recommended the children to have other support systems available and not to be emotionally or financially dependent on their parents prior to disclosing. As well, five of the parents urged the children to evaluate their parents' possible reactions to such disclosures prior to coming out. Finally, many parents demonstrated their acceptance of their gay children by disclosing to other people. For

example, five parents commented on the importance but difficulty of disclosing to others, especially extended family.

Now that the parents' experiences of their relationships with their gay and lesbian children have been fully described, the attention turns to the experiences of the respective adult children of these ten parents. The experiences of these ten gay and lesbian adult children, specifically their relationships with their parents from adolescence to the present, are described in the next chapter. Both first and second order core themes which developed from the interviews with these ten adult children are explored and discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

After the first and second order themes from the parents' data were developed, the focus turned to the core themes which emerged from the interviews with the adult children. In this chapter, the results which were derived from the interviews with the respective adult children are presented. These results represent the core themes of the gay and lesbian adult children's experiences of their relationships with their parents. Within these results, the parent-child relationship was explored as the gay and lesbian adult children recounted their experiences as they progressed from adolescence to adulthood. Both positive and negative experiences of the parent-child relationship were described by the children.

The interviews with the adult children focused on the same basic research question that the parents were asked, "Would you describe your experiences of your relationship with your parent(s) throughout the years, specifically from adolescence to the present?". The objective was to try to discover the common core themes that the adult children shared with regard to their experiences of their relationships with their parents. The children's data were analyzed by selecting key statements and deriving themes. As a result of the data analysis, first and second order themes were created.

As a result of the data analysis, the following themes were derived in relation to the children's experiences of their relationships with their parents from adolescence to the present:

Precursors to Coming out

- Conflict in Past Relationship
- Attributes of Past Relationship

Coming to Terms with Sexuality

- Feeling Different as a Child
- Inner Struggle with Being Gay

- Taking Risks: Exploring, Owning, and Disclosing Sexuality

Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance

- Fears of Disclosure
- Reasons for Disclosure
- Reactions to Disclosure
- Strengthened Relationship
- Being Supported and Accepted

Lessons Learned: Advising Others

- Advice for Children
- Advice for Parents

Explanation of Themes

In this section, each of the four second order themes and their subsequent first order themes are described in detail. In order to fully understand each of the themes and their origins, quotes from the ten adult children are incorporated throughout this section. The four second order themes were as follows: Precursor to Coming Out, Coming to Terms with Sexuality, Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance, and Lessons Learned: Advising Others.

Precursors to Coming Out referred to the type of relationship that the children had with their parents prior to disclosing their sexuality, including both the positives and the negatives of the past relationship. Coming to Terms with Sexuality described the children's process of coming to terms with their homosexuality, beginning with feeling different and moving towards exploring, owning, and disclosing their sexuality. The third second order theme, Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance, described the children's process of coming out to their parents and the families' movement towards a place of acceptance. Finally, the fourth second order theme, Lessons Learned: Advising Others, explored the children's

recommendations to parents who may have gay or lesbian children and to children who may be trying to disclose their sexuality to their parents.

Precursor to Coming Out

Precursors to Coming Out was one of the four core themes which emerged from the data. Within this theme, the children described their past relationships with their parents prior to disclosing their sexuality. They explored both the conflicts and the attributes of their past relationships with their parents. It seemed important to explore both the positives and the negatives of these past relationships, in order to understand the present parent-child relationships. Also, many people may assume that parents who are accepting of their children's homosexuality may have always had positive past relationships or vice versa. Therefore, it seemed imperative to understand the history of the parent-child relationship in order to fully understand the children's process of coming out to their parents.

Conflict in past relationship.

All ten children spoke about having to cope with conflicts or difficulties in their past relationships with their parents. Five of the children recounted coping with their parents' struggles with emotional difficulties, such as depression, suicide attempts, and addictions. For example, Amy explained,

> It seems to me that, I don't know, to forget or whatever, [one of my parents] would drink a lot. And I had a really hard time with that. You know. I didn't understand it. . . .A typical child, you try to be the best that you can be so that you're. . . .And you know, it has nothing to do with you really. . . .Like, you know, you don't know that, so that's how it all went. And I had a really hard time with that.

Holly reported her feelings over the suicide attempt of one of her parents. Regarding this, she stated,

> [One of my parents] attempted [suicide]. And was in the hospital for a couple of days . . . that kind of put a rift in the relationship. You know, sort of a subliminal thing, like I didn't think about it for a long time, and then after you know, several months went by, I was like, "Oh hey, this is an issue." Like, "This is, this is really getting to me." And, so I started looking at that, and then I got really, I always [did writing] and [my writing] was getting very very angry, you know. I kind of looked at my life and went, "Oh no, something is wrong." And then just one day out of the blue, I started, you know, getting mad at [one of my parents] about trying to kill [oneself]. And this was like a year later.

Also, three children recounted having a close relationship with one parent but a very distant and difficult relationship with the other parent. For instance, Luke reported having a closer relationship with his mother than with his father while he was growing up.

> With my father, . . . I'd say it's not so much that I had a relationship with him as I didn't have one, like he would come home, he'd eat dinner, watch television. Mom would, like when I was still going to elementary and junior high school and high school, she would say like, "What would you learn today? or Are you having problems with anything?, Can I help you with anything"? But Dad would just come home and would be there, like he'd be there physically, but Mom would be there kind of mentally and emotionally. So, I think the negative feelings that I feel about the relationship with my father was that I didn't really have a relationship with him. . . .I didn't really feel connected to him like I did with my mother.

Rebecca also reported having a closer relationship with one parent than the other parent. Regarding this, she reported,

> I didn't even know him. I didn't even know him, and the fact that I ended up getting into so much trouble, I ended up seeing him more and more, because that was the only time I saw him [regarding disciplining]. So, that just distanced us even more.

Another child described her past relationship with both parents as being distant. Regarding this, Dianne commented, "Relationship with both parents not that great . . . mother critical, not there for me emotionally, father away a lot on business. Neither very supportive. . . .Overall a great lack of communication in our whole family."

Five children recounted other types of conflicts involving differences of opinions regarding finances, friends, acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and family rules. These conflicts seemed to involve power struggles between the parents and their children that are part of a healthy adolescence. For instance, Jonathan described his power conflicts with his parents.

> Well, I think a lot of it is just sort of conflict, you know, conflict with what you want . . . what a child wants opposed to what actually happens. Like, I think I was sort of spoiled in a way, like I think I had a sense of what I'm entitled or whatever. I think that every teenager are a bit selfish or whatever, but a lot of it was around that and a lot of it was about strictness issues. My father when I was really young was really strict, about sharing things with friends . . . and we had this sort of set family time, . . . and I was the one who always left to play with friends and got in trouble for it, . . . that was where a lot of the conflict came from, because I didn't see that as a priority at the time. . . .Yeah, that's one of the main things, and I guess just, . . . issues around . . . just conceptions about what kind of behavior was acceptable.

Attributes of past relationship.

Despite all of the children reporting some type of conflict or difficulty in their past relationships with their parents, nine children reported overall positive past relationships with their parents. Five of the children were from two-parent families and four of these children reported a closer relationship in the past with the mother than with the father. The remaining five children were from step-families (three children) and single-parent homes (two children). Not surprisingly, the children from step-families reported to have a closer relationship with their biological or adoptive parent than their step-parent. Regarding attributes of the past relationship, seven of the children recalled their parents' constant availability, support, concern, involvement, help, and respect. For example, Rebecca commented on her mother's constant support and presence.

> I guess that she's just never left. She's always been there, . . . regardless of the situation. She has always been there . . . for everybody. She's funny that way. She's always second in line for everything, and she always puts everyone else first, which is kind of annoying. But, yeah, she has always done that.

Also, Holly described her mother's continual support and concern. She explained that her mother always put their relationship first. Regarding this she explained,

> It is supportive [mother-daughter relationship] you know, that we, we are very supportive and I know that if nobody else in the world would support me in suffering, my mom would. And I've said a thousand times, nobody makes me choose between my mother and death, because there isn't a choice. Like those lines of loyalty are drawn. And my mom has in her history of relationships very often been forced to choose between her man and her kids, and it's kind of a twisted pattern but when the choice has come between me and the man, there's been a line drawn on my side. I don't think that I've ever lost out.

Additionally, Jonathan reported that his parents were very involved in his life as they were always interested in his activities and willing to help in any way they could. For instance, he stated,

> I mean probably over-whelmingly positive [regarding their past relationship], . . . they were always very much involved in my activities at school or you know, my father was my coach for 10 years and my leader [of a youth group] for 10 years, so a lot of direct involvement, in that sense . . . generally fairly willing to help out and to be actively engaged in whatever I was doing.

Regarding other attributes of past parent-child relationships, three children recounted their parents being very trusting of them. Two of the children reported having open communication with their parents. Four children stated that their parents were very open-minded and accepting of differences. For example, David believed that his mother was very open and tolerant of differences. This was evident as he reported,

> But in terms of being gay I remember my question was when I was about six years old I said, "Mom do men ever marry"? And she said, "Well, yeah they do if the conditions are right for them at the time." She gave me what I would guess would be considered a positive outlook on that, certainly not negative just to leave the door open. I think she always knew that I was gay.

Also, two of the children greatly admired their parents for their acts of courage such as standing up for their own happiness and trying to correct injustices. Luke admired his mother's actions which were rooted in her firm belief in equality for everyone. He reported,

> I really admired her because she's a very strong person and she has, I guess a very strong moral fiber. Like, I remember even when I was small, and when we're in kind of environments where, people were being racist or sexist, even though, like speaking out, it would cause, I wouldn't say so much problems

but like a reaction from people, like my mom would never back down, and she'd say, "No, like you're wrong." And it wouldn't matter who she said it to, if it was her closest friend or, another family member, like it really didn't matter if . . . by saying that she would end up being removed from a social group or something. . . .I guess she wouldn't bend if it, if bending meant taking the easy way and avoiding problems, she doesn't bend when it comes to things like trying to treat everyone equally. I think that's one of the things that I really admire about my mother and something that I try to emulate in her. I think that's kind of where I get my sense of morality, from, is very very much my mother. . . .She's just someone that I really admire and someone that I really look up to.

Coming to Terms with Sexuality

Coming to Terms with Sexuality was the second of four core themes which were derived from the data analysis of the interviews with the adult children. Within this second core theme, the adult children described their process of coming to terms with their homosexuality. Within this process, they reported feeling different as children and explained their inner struggles with being gay. Also, within this process, they discussed the risks that they took as a means of exploring, owning, and then finally disclosing their sexuality.

Feeling different as a child.

Seven of the children reported feeling different than other children their age as young as four to nine years. All five of the boys stated that they felt different from a very young age (i.e., as early as four years old). Regarding feeling different from a young age, Luke explained,

> Well, I remember I think I was about four years old, . . . I don't know for some reason a very vivid recollection, is that at some point when I was four years old, I came to the realization that I was somehow different. I didn't, at that

> age, didn't know what it was or what it meant. But also instinctively I somehow knew that, it wouldn't be well received, . . . If I was to express that feeling of difference and that somehow, like I had the feeling that I should keep it quiet and not tell anyone.

Ben also commented that he had a sense from an early age that he was different. He explained,

> I felt different, but I could never put a finger on it. . . .Oh, I just, I didn't seem to be like the other boys or, just you know, just something wasn't the same . . . I can't put a finger on it. It's just, just some sense.

Four of the boys, between the ages of 8 and 10, realized that they were gay and attracted to males. For example, David reported,

> I thought there was something different about me. I certainly didn't know the word gay but I always knew there was something about me, I just wasn't quite sure what it was until I was about eight years old. Then at that time, I had a friend when I was in grade two. He was in grade six. I would say to him, "I love you" and he would say the same thing back to me. Of course I didn't quite think anything of this at the time. But looking back on that, that's kind of interesting because later I found out that he was the school bully. He hated everybody else but he was always, always nice to me. So I think when I was about eight years old, I think was my first really conscious realization that I was gay.

Regarding feeling attracted to the same-sex, Luke realized his attraction at about age 10. He recounted feelings of isolation as he did not fit the deviant label of homosexuality of that day. He expressed his experience as follows:

> I knew I was attracted to males and not to females like probably even when I was about 10 years old. And I didn't actually find out about homosexuality and what that meant until about grade six, when I started reading in the school

> library, encyclopedias. And they had some psychology books there, and back then it was like if your a homosexual, you're a raving lunatic. And I just kind of, yeah like, this sounds like me, . . . like yeah I am attracted to males but not females. But with all these other things, like, you have to have sex 20 times a day and you're deviant and, you molest small children and animals, and etc. All that stuff, I said, "Well, that's not me," so I felt like I was, kind of like the superfreak, way off on one end of the spectrum. . . .Like I felt like I was the absolutely the only person on the face of the planet that was like this. And so I thought, well that's, not something I can share with anyone because they would never understand it.

Two boys recounted participating in sexual play at a young age (5 to 10 years) with other young boys and having male-focused fantasies. For example, Jonathan reported

> Well, I think I have always felt that I was a queer, which is sort of like different. I always felt like I had a different take on things, which was part and parcel of I guess, being attracted to men, but I think that came really early, like probably like eight or nine. . . .Like I always have felt that, and that has affected the way I deal with events or whatever in my life. It's always shaped my identity, prior to anything else, and I guess probably the gay issue was probably shortly thereafter, I guess in terms of being attracted to men, and certainly not acting on it, but being more aware. . . .It didn't take very long to piece it together [that I was gay] at all. It was probably shortly after. . . .A lot of it was just sort of fantasy, whatever my fantasies were. And I mean I had, like kids have sexual whatever, playing with their friends, and a lot of that for me was always with male friends, so that really seemed to fit quite nicely.

Only one of the male children realized in his later teens (18 years old) that he was gay. Three of the boys, as young as age four, reported feelings of shame and

guilt as a result of these differences. Regarding feelings of shame and guilt, Jamie explained,

> I knew I was gay all along. Like I knew, like even as a small child . . . in grade four we used to have sex clubs and I knew that in grade four I had erections. I had sexual erections because . . . we were playing these games and I had an erection. . . . So the sexuality was there but . . . the mature sexuality wasn't there. . . .Like I had a couple of my secret friends that we used to do [sexual] things together. But I remember just being really really ashamed. . . .Shame attached to the act afterwards, not during, not when I was with my secret friend, it was after, after the fact that I had gotten caught [by another friend] and [he said] that it was wrong. . . . And from adolescence, like I knew, that want or need had never stopped.

Four of the five girls recognized differences as they reflected on their childhood memories such as having crushes on female classmates or teachers or not feeling completely comfortable with female friends as they did with their male friends. However, they did not realize they were gay until later in their lives, usually during junior high and high school. One of these girls remembered being attracted to a female teacher. Regarding this Amy explained,

> Well, I guess about seven, when I realized it. I knew at that point it was, it was different because it's like, "Okay, nobody else I know is attracted to women except me." Like all of my girlfriends were attracted to boys. . . .I was [attracted] to my teacher. . . .I think that's probably normal, I think everybody does. But, that's when it really hit home with me [that I was different] . . . I just felt like I knew, there was something for me to have a crush on my teacher. But that wasn't something that I talked about. And it wasn't my focus. . . .It didn't really become a focus until I got to junior high.

Another girl remembered playing sexual games with other female children rather than with male children and commented on having characteristics such as being active, independent, and playing sports. Holly also recalled having an awareness of feeling different at a young age. She described this difference as follows:

> I played doctor with the little girl down the street instead of the little boy down the street. It was just like, "Hey, you know, whatever that's cool." And it was just really open. But there was some awareness of being different when I was a little kid . . . I don't think you can say, I knew I was homosexual when I was a littlekid, but some people do. So I'm not invalidating what they're saying, . . . It sounds dumb but it [awareness of being different] was really a strong independence. It was just a real brutal independence that said, "I am who I am and no little boys are going to make me be, tell me what to do." And I liked being around my girlfriends, but I didn't even need to be around them. I can just be me.

Also, Sarah reflected on her feelings of being different than her heterosexual female peers as she explained,

> I guess I'd have to say, I mean this is looking back and trying to guess and figure out why but I figure for some reason there was always something that I wasn't comfortable trusting myself around my girlfriends. There was some line that I didn't want to cross. There was always this bit of guardedness that I never really had when I was around my guy friends. I just sort of let loose and be me.

Only one female reported not feeling different in comparison to other girls her age. For example, Dianne realized that she was gay at the age of 16. She stated, "Sixteen for sure [I knew that I was gay], fell in love with a friend [female] but didn't feel different before, as I liked boys."

Therefore, in comparison to the four male children who realized their homosexuality prior to their teen years, four of the five female children did not realize they were gay until their teen years. One female recounted not realizing she was gay until she was in her early 20's. For instance, Rebecca did not realize she was gay until her teenage years. She explained,

> I did the straight thing. I had the boyfriends and whatnot, to follow the norm, and . . . Actually, which I'm really glad I did because I didn't know [that I was gay]. I guess I might be curious if I didn't. And it has actually made me feel better about myself, knowing that I am who I am, and that is not what I want at all. . . . My last boyfriend, he was amazing . . . and there was nothing there. . . .When I finally started to [get] into the hugging and the kissing. It's funny, but it is the physical part that makes you realize because you just, when there is no connection there, you feel funny, like you're doing something wrong. But then when I figured out that I wasn't [straight], it kind of all fell into place.

Inner struggle with being gay.

Six of the children acknowledged experiencing periods of depression and suicidal ideation during adolescence and one child had attempted suicide. These children stated that their depression and suicidal ideation was either fully or partly related to their struggles with coming to terms with being gay. Four of the five males reported struggling with depression and suicidal ideation which they believed were either fully or partially related to their struggles with their sexuality. Luke recounted that his depression and suicidal ideation were fully related to his struggle with his homosexuality. This was evident as he stated,

> Really bad mood swings. One day would be great and then the next week would be like just black depression and to me that was normal because that's all I'd ever known...But I never hated myself, but I suppressed a lot, of anger and a lot of hate and then probably, . . . starting at about 16, I started feeling

> suicidal and that kept on right until I came out. That's actually probably the reason why I did come out was I got to a point where I guess my defenses, my wall was starting to crack and I couldn't cope with anything anymore. You know like, trying to suppress how I felt was like a 24 hour occupation. And I was getting to a point where I was having problems functioning . . . so with the help of a really good friend, I came out. . . .I got to the point where I said, "You know, I'm ready to commit suicide now," Like I really really wanted to do it, and I thought, "Well, you know, I might as well come out and take a risk and see what happens because I can still commit suicide later on". And probably the only thing that kept me from committing suicide even at that point was because I knew it would kill my parents. . . .So I think my relationship with my parents, especially with my mother, was probably the thing that kept me from actually doing that.

Although only one of the males reported no depression or suicidal ideation, he did report a period of low self-esteem with regard to not feeling attractive as a gay male. As a result of his low self-esteem, Jonathan reported withdrawing and avoiding his sexuality. Unfortunately, one of the young males did attempt suicide. Jamie reported attempting suicide at 15 years of age but continuing to struggle with depression and suicidal ideation from age 17 to 19 years. He disclosed that his suicide ideation and behaviors were partially related to his struggles with coming to terms with his sexuality.

> See I had always, I had always known that I was gay and I think it was basically the poor, the poor me, left to live and [my friend] died [committed suicide]. Like, I can throughout my whole life I've known I was gay. With any suicide attempt there would have been, that would have been a factor. That would have been an element. Like it, there's no denying that I would of, I knew that what I was, that I was wrong. The feelings that I was feeling were

> wrong and stuff. I didn't, I never acted on them. So I can't say they're as real as they are now, but I know that they were, they were a big part of it [suicide attempt].

In comparison to most of the males (four) who reported periods of depression and suicidal ideation during adolescence, only two of the five females recounted similar experiences relating to their struggles with their sexuality. For example, Dianne reported, "I was depressed and suicidal at ages 16 to 17 years, only partly related to sexuality, more related to past events and poor relationships with parents and siblings." Also, Sarah believed that her depression and suicidal thoughts were partly related to her struggle with coming to terms with her sexuality. Regarding this, she stated,

> All I can really recall from that time was just sort of, just a big emptiness, just a big, not being able to see where my life would fit into the future. I think it may, I guess when you think about it, it may be related to sexuality too because I think that I had friends around me who knew what they wanted. Who knew they were going to university and knew they wanted to go and study this or that and people talking about how many babies they wanted to have. I kept thinking there must be something wrong with me because I don't want any of that.

Three of the females did not report feelings of depression or suicidal tendencies during adolescence. However, they did comment on other difficulties which they indicated were related to their struggles with their sexuality. For instance, some reported finding junior high and high school difficult as a result of not fitting in, being teased about being gay, and realizing that it was not a safe or accepting place to be open about their homosexuality. Regarding junior high and high school not being a safe environment, Amy commented on dating boys so no one would suspect that she was gay. She stated,

> And I dated a couple of guys [in high school] and, but it would only go so far and then it was like, I mean the interest wasn't there. They'd ask me out and I'd say okay, and you know, we'd go on some dates and, I wouldn't care whether they phoned or not. If I saw them in school, big deal. Like it, there was just nothing there. But I did it to keep up appearances. So my friends wouldn't talk or anybody else wouldn't talk.

Another participant, Rebecca, reported not feeling depressed but initially worried that she may be transgender as a result of not understanding her dreams at night and her feelings and attraction for the same-sex. This was evident as she explained,

> No [regarding feeling depressed in the past]. Actually, I was kind of worried for a while. I used to have dreams where in the dreams I was a guy. In that way, it made it seem normal. I really worried about that actually. I thought, "Oh God, I have to have a sex change to be normal." I figured out I didn't. But, no I never actually felt bad about myself. I never have because I have always been, by the time I had actually looked at myself in the mirror and said, you know, came out to myself . . . that had taken so long and it was so painful. . . .Well, no, not painful, but just. . . .Well, I guess so, to actually admit it to yourself, that I wasn't worried about what anybody else was going to think . . . so I really didn't have [any depression].

Taking risks: Exploring, owning, and disclosing sexuality.

Coming to terms with being gay involved the children taking risks as they explored their sexuality. Regarding taking risks, seven of the children reported disclosing to others such as friends, relatives, and counsellors that they were gay prior to disclosing to their parents. Amy described her first disclosure to a friend as follows:

> I worked with a guy and he was gay and I didn't know it. And we became really good friends and . . . I guess probably I didn't feel threatened by him because he wasn't coming onto me, wasn't hitting on me or anything. So you know, we became friends . . . And he came over to my place one day and said . . . "I have something to tell you." And I said, "Okay." And well then he got scared and he said, "What's the worst thing that I can tell you about me? You're dying." And I don't know, you know like, I wasn't prepared for that. When he told me he was gay, I was floored. Like I didn't, I had no idea. But at that point I said, "Well, I think I am too." Well then I felt horrible. Because we talked about it and he went home. And then I felt like, "Oh my God, I told somebody, that was hard." Like I was just, I didn't know what to do with myself. He was the first person I ever admitted it to, and not that I thought that he was going to tell anybody or do anything, but maybe it's just the finally admitting it.

One adult child recounted the important process of verbally disclosing as a means of starting the journey of self-acceptance. For instance, David's verbal self-disclosure began his journey of self-acceptance ending his feelings of depression and suicidal ideation. He stated,

> If you want me to talk just about that for a moment [regarding what made the difference for him, going from feeling depressed and suicidal to wanting to live]. I think once I said the word gay and allowed myself to be a little more of who I was, maybe not even with a lot of people, just with my own mother I felt a lot more at ease with myself. I was able to give myself a little more breathing space to exist. To not have to be so worried about, "Oh my God, am I looking the wrong way or do I look funny, or do I have a sign on my forehead." . . . Better about it, still a little unsure but better about it and asking questions.

In comparison to David, Holly believed in order to disclose to others she needed to first come to terms with and accept her own sexuality. She explained,

> Like you need to be honest with yourself and once you're honest with yourself and supporting yourself, then you can . . . can move up, and you can tell anybody in the world . . . But I personally took two years of healing, you know, and of real serious introspection before I came out publicly. And when I did it was a huge success.

Six children explored their sexuality by participating in various functions which were gay related such as going to the gay clubs, gay dances, participating in gay support groups, singing in a gay choir, and dating people of the same-sex. Regarding taking risks and attending gay related activities, Luke described participating in his first gay positive function as follows:

> And I think it was the second last group meeting of that year, that she finally, I remember . . . well, I was sitting . . . [on campus] studying and she was walking by and she said, "Well, you know this group starts in 10 minutes." And I said, "Well, I might go to the next one." She said, "No, we're going today because this is the second last one." And I said, "No, no, I'll go to the next one." And she just grabbed my hand and actually literally dragged me over to [the location] where this group was meeting and went with me to my, to the first group. And when I sat down I saw like all these people and you know, they were gays and lesbians, and I thought like, "These are like, some of them I recognized. I walked past them at school." And I thought, "I would have never known that they were gay." Then I started thinking like, "How many other people have I walked past and not known." And they looked totally normal to me, they don't look like these sexual deviants or raving lunatics, that I've you know, I had read about. And that started the change [from depression to feeling better about myself].

Despite being teased often, one child reported taking risks by verbally defending gay rights while in high school. For example, Holly stated,

> I won't be a victim. You know. And as soon as you let that stuff [teasing] get to you, you shut down the lines of communication. My agenda then was to make people understand that homosexuality was an issue, but that it was a human issue. You know. So if I'd of, just gotten mad and thrown my arms up in the air, they wouldn't have listened. So if I kept joking and kept playing basketball with them, and kept hanging out you know, they'd listen.

Also, three of the children stated the importance of moving away from home in order to explore their sexuality. As well, three children found that when they finally disclosed that they were gay, their personalities seemed changed or as one child stated he became more himself. They appeared to go from being introverted to more extroverted. David noted this personality change and described it as follows:

> What I found after I came out and said this is who I am was that my whole personality also came out because when I was in the closet my whole personality was also in the closet. Nobody knew who I was, I was very shy, I wouldn't talk to people. That was it, I was a very closed person. I was afraid very, very . . . everything, but once I came out and finally decided that I felt at least comfortable enough to say that, more of me started coming out and being who I was and open to knowing people and having them know me because that's I think being gay is a big part of you. It's not just a little word. It's a big piece of your personality and if you draw that in you draw yourself in, in a way.

Ben also commented that his personality changed after he began to disclose his sexuality. Regarding his personality change, he commented,

> I was always [introverted] up to the point where I came out, I was always very introverted and very quiet and shy and since then I just sort of, my shells

broken off I'm not introverted anymore. . . .Very much more outgoing actually. . . .like it, I like being outgoing, although I don't, I won't go out and talk to a stranger on the street type of thing. But I don't hide my opinion.

Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance

Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance was the third second order theme which was derived from the data analysis of the interviews with the gay and lesbian adult children. Within this third core theme, the children described the entire process of coming out to their parents which resulted in the parents accepting and supporting their children. The children began by discussing their fears around disclosing and their reasons for disclosing their homosexuality to their parents. Also, the children reported the various reactions, both negative and positive of their parents following their disclosures. Additionally, the children commented on the strengthened parent-child relationships which developed as a result of the disclosures and explained the various ways that their parents expressed their support and their acceptance.

Fears of disclosure.

Six of the children reported being afraid to disclose to their parents that they were gay. They described being afraid of rejection, specifically the rejection of their parents. Amy explained her fear as follows:

I was [20 something] I think. And, I came out to her [my mother], I'd wanted to for a long time. But I was scared. . . .And I didn't want to lose her. And I knew she was she was open minded but I, it's one thing for your hairdresser to be gay and to be accepting, or you know, someone on the street or but, your own daughter and your only daughter. You know. That was a different thing . . . and I was really scared to lose her.

Luke believed his fear over losing his parents delayed his coming out. He explained,

> I think that was, a really big, stumbling block for my coming out, was the fear that if I did come out, the few people in my life, in my life who I thought were important to me would leave because they couldn't accept who I was or what I was.

One child was afraid of losing his parents as such a loss could result in losing his home, and their financial support for education. This same child reported feeling fearful when his parents realized he was gay as he didn't feel emotionally ready to educate them on his sexuality as he was just beginning the process of coming out. For example, Ben described his emotional unreadiness,

> I wasn't ready because, when [my parents realized I was gay], I had to work through all of the emotions right. Like, they they were quite ignorant in what being gay was. And I didn't have the emotional stability right then to educate them.

Reasons for disclosure.

Three of the children reported various reasons for disclosing to their parents, such as being unable to hide their sexuality, no longer able to handle all of the lies, and their partners giving them an ultimatum. Regarding not wanting to continue the lies and the urging of his partner to disclose, Jamie stated,

> But maybe you were better off just having, being open and honest [disclosing], and dealing with, dealing with, the hurt [of rejection] than dealing with all the lies continuously, you know. Like it, I try to encourage, I have quite a few friends that you know say, "Oh I haven't told my parents yet." I was like, just like them, you know, I was just like them, and I said. . . "I would have never told my parents." You know, it wasn't until I met [my partner], where [my partner] gave me the ultimatum.

One of these three children disclosed to their parents as not disclosing was becoming too difficult as conversations were becoming increasingly arduous. This was evident as Jonathan explained,

> There is really no other way to explain it. This friend, I think I mentioned his name a few times, but I basically moved [in with him] and then I was going [on a trip] with him, and it just was a bit much, so the catalyst was partly that. I knew that was the milestone, like I couldn't go away without telling them. . . I talked to my sister . . . who I am probably closest to, and it was just a really weird conversation, you know, after . . . I had spent two months [living at his house], with this person, and it started getting really hard to explain it, so and the conversations were really weird. I remember after that she had called up Mom and she was all upset because we just weren't, we weren't talking or communicating, and then the next time I talked to my parents, that's when I told them just that, what was what.

Reactions to disclosure.

Six of the children recounted some of their parents' initial reactions to their disclosures as being that of shock, concern, worry, distress, and fear over such things as discrimination, neighbors finding out, and the possibility of contracting the HIV disease. Jonathan described his mother's reaction as one of fear, specifically over his risk of discrimination and disease. He stated,

> And I remember Mom asked again "Is this person gay that you're living with"? and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "Are you gay"? and I said "Yeah." She started crying . . . my Mom's biggest fear was like that gay men have these messy break ups or something that was her first reaction . . . I think two months previously, she had gone to see (a movie about the impact of AIDS) with one of my siblings and she was all upset about that and worried about me. . . .Afraid of AIDS, and getting hurt by people. I guess it was a protective

thing. And as I said, she has always been protective anyway about those kinds of issues.

Two children reported that initially their parents were very upset and responded with negative comments. However, within a short period of time, the initial negative reactions soon changed to more accepting comments. Rebecca experienced this shifting process from negative to more accepting reactions when she disclosed to her father. She commented,

> Mom and I were talking to him [father] downstairs about moving home, and that was it. Both of us just broke down and I had to tell him. He called me every name in the book and asked me to leave the house, which was fine because I wasn't living there [laughing].Thank God. Yeah, I went home and cried for a couple of hours and my roommate came home and we sat together, then the phone rang. There was silence, and I think he maybe just got out a sentence. He said, "I want you to know that you're still my daughter and I love you," and he was crying. First time, I ever heard my father cry and he hung up the phone. That was the end of that. So, he is so, so cool. He gets along with my partner. My ex-partner, he loved her. Absolutely loved her.

Following the initial reactions, one parent indicated that her child was too important to lose over such an issue. Another child commented that her parents felt relief. For example, Dianne stated,

> They [my parents] discovered me with my girlfriend, I never said anything to them, eventually my mother tried to talk to me, I didn't want to, very awkward situation. I was resistant to them knowing about my personal life. At first [our] relationship was awkward for several months, then much better, with more communication. I realized they didn't mind they were in fact relieved.

Another child indicated that his parents were disappointed that he could not tell them sooner. Also, three of the children reported their parents initially responding

in a positive and supportive way with no evidence of shock or distress. Sarah was surprised at the lack of shock that her mother displayed. This was evident as she explained,

> I was almost disappointed when I sat down to tell her and she said, "Yeah, that's what I thought." I was expecting this big shock or something. I don't know what I expected but I expected a little more surprise or something. I didn't expect her to be disappointed or angry or upset or anything. I fully expected that, I know her to be a pretty liberal minded person so I knew it wouldn't be something that would bother her in anyway.

Three of the children commented on their parents' concern and sadness over loss of traditions such as grandchildren and weddings. Amy described her mother's feelings of loss and explained her understanding of such loss as follows:

> I mean she got self-absorbed I suppose, is what she calls it. You know, I don't see it that way, I mean she was concerned because there would be no grandchildren and you know, and that type of thing. And that's not necessarily true. But you know, that's what went through her head. . . .Because she wanted to have grandchildren and you know, I mean all parents want the best for you, but it tends to be focused on, they want you to get married and have a good husband and a good life and make lots of money, and have kids and that tends to be the focus for all parents. And once, like, having a gay child just kind of comes out of left field for them. So all of a sudden that's not going to happen, they got to change their whole perception. . . .And how, you're going to be the happiest. Cause they never thought of that before, they're going to be with the same-sex, and that makes them the happiest. Well, that's a big twist.

Another child reported that his parents went in the closet after he came out. Regarding this, Ben reported,

> And now it's, it's moved on to fears for them sort of, I came out and they go in, for awhile. . . .Yeah, that seems to be what happens from everything I've read. Kid comes out, the parents go in. But my parents can't really hide, since I'm, I'm [involved in the community]. So they've been forced out, too. . . .But they're doing well with it.

Additionally, three children indicated that their step-parent struggled more with accepting their sexuality than their other parent. Sarah reported that her mother's partner was uncomfortable with her being openly gay. Regarding this, she explained,

> Then it came out that it [being openly gay] was something that was really difficult for [my mother's partner]. That he was very uncomfortable seeing us touching or holding hands or anything like that. So we had big discussions about okay when you're in your home and if we come to visit . . . or we're at your house then you know it's your space, your turf, your rules kind of thing . . so I got to the point where I sort of said, "Okay, we won't be coming to visit very often." Because I can't do that, I can't stop and think, "Oops, I accidentally held her hand." I'm so used to just not thinking about that, not editing that kind of behavior. I found it really hard. . . .So it was sticky for a while but we're getting through it. We're all getting used to each other now as a family so it's getting back to where it was before.

Strengthened relationship.

Six children reported that their relationships with their parents became closer following their disclosures. Rebecca reported her relationship improving with her mother after disclosing her sexuality. She stated,

> She's [mother] my best friend. . . .Yeah, actually coming out has brought us closer. It wasn't like that at first, but it's almost forced her to get to know me better and my lifestyle. So, it has just brought us closer together. We hang out. She's amazing to begin with.

Also, Jamie believed his relationship with his parents grew closer following his disclosure. Regarding this, he commented, "And but it's, it's a very positive healthy relationship [with parents], like I can, now, now, that I'm out, I can tell my mom and dad absolutely anything. You know. I wouldn't tell them absolutely everything, but I could."

As well, David reported that his relationship with his mother became closer following his revealing his sexuality. This was evident as he disclosed,

> I think we got closer to each other in that way because I told [her I was gay], I revealed that part of myself finally. It got a bit easier because I was very, very, very, upset about being gay. I was terrified. I thought, "Oh, my God, how could this happen to me. I'm already disabled, I can't be gay on top of that. That just won't happen," and of course it did and there wasn't any way to get away from that, but I was very miserable, I was very suicidal. Or not very, but I used to have thoughts so our relationship became easier once I actually said the word gay.

One child commented that he was unsure if the relationship changed as he explained that it was just one more area of his life of which his parents were supportive. He believed that being in a relationship when he disclosed may have made it easier for his parents to be supportive. Regarding this, Jonathan commented,

> Like I'm not sure if it [parent-child relationship] really changed that much [following the disclosure], . . . like they've always been very supportive. Yeah, and basically what they did is that they just added another thing that they were supportive about. . . .Like it wasn't sort of a, "See change" from like, sort of detachment to, like they've always had this need for direct involvement and you know, I've always told them everything apart from that [being gay]. I guess, but even with that [being gay], there was not a lot to tell anyway prior to that [my relationship with my partner]. And I guess because

when I came out it was associated with a relationship I was having, then it was sort of easier for them to be supportive about.

Another child who had a prior close relationship with her parent recounted conflict in the relationship as a result of the step-parent having difficulty with acceptance. Two children reported negative distant relationships with one of their parents prior to their disclosures. But following their disclosures, the parent-child relationships improved with both parents. For example, Luke explained the reasons he believed his relationship with his parents improved following his disclosure as follows:

> But I found that especially since I've come out, our relationship has really improved. I think, like when, when I was still in the closet, I was pushing people away, like I wouldn't let them get close. And to my mother that didn't matter, she kept trying and trying and trying, and it didn't matter, like my mother is the kind of person who it doesn't matter if you, if she really loves someone, it doesn't matter if they reciprocate like she'll keep loving that person just because. I think my father is more, if you don't love him back, he kind of says you know, "To hell with it." And I think he was picking up on me trying to keep people distant, and was taking it personally, and I think maybe that's why, our relationship was the way it was. And, after I came out I think he understood more about where I was coming from and I think that really broke down a lot of barriers between my father and myself. I'd have to say over all, definitely 100 percent my relationship has improved with both of my parents since I've come out.

Being supported and accepted.

After the children disclosed, the parents' initial reactions varied from that of shock, worry, fear, distress to initial rejection. Interestingly, following these initial reactions, eight of the children reported that their parents became supportive and

accepting of them. For example, despite a difficult year, Ben described his parents as being supportive and accepting. He stated, "Quite positive [regarding his relationship with his parents]. Quite positive. Even though there's been a lot of adversity in the last year, I come out always with my feet on the ground and head up high and . . . they're still standing by me."

Jonathan also recounted his parents' initial negative reactions shifting to that of support and acceptance. Regarding this shifting in reactions, he explained that his family called back only a few days after he disclosed, expressing their love and acceptance. The family's acceptance resulted in Jonathan and his partner traveling to visit the family. Jonathan's family's support was evident as he described;

> Yeah, they had their family meeting [after I disclose], and they called me back I guess, [a few] days later and all my [siblings] got on the phone and said that they supported me and loved me and that stuff. . . .But I mean, they were all . . it was . . . it really couldn't have happened probably better I don't think. . . (My partner) came out with me shortly thereafter and I mean, everyone got along really well. In some ways, he's a favorite-in-law. I mean not favorite, but I mean, they have more in common with him than my [siblings'] spouses, so it's quite interesting now that. . . .He's very different than the rest of us in ways that are good.

Jamie believed that his parents' support and acceptance of his homosexuality was a result of their years living in fear that he would commit suicide during his depressed adolescence. Regarding his belief, Jamie explained,

> I had failed, I had failed two grades. . . .I was 17 going on, yeah I was 17 when (my friend) died and, they (my parents) had, they had an awakening because they you know, they were so worried that I was going to commit suicide that, what ever, I think, basically I think that stuck with them, what ever and whoever I was going to be was fine with them . . . like with any of

> their children. I think if my best friend had not committed suicide, I think if my parents did not have a suicide scare, that I might not be around, they would not have had such a positive reaction, then what they've had.

Indeed, Jamie's parents demonstrated their support of his homosexuality as a month following his disclosure, his parents and family included him and his partner in their Christmas holidays.

Additionally, seven of the children stated that their parents showed their support by being proactive with regard to gay rights. For example, five of the children reported their parents participating in such gay-positive activities as PFLAG. Jonathan commented on his parents' participation in PFLAG and his understanding of their involvement as follows:

> I think that it's [our parent-child relationship] really close and really positive, and something that's really important to them [parents]. I think the fact that they got involved in this [gay positive] conference and they did the PFLAG thing and stuff, they obviously were really looking for. . . .I think they felt really bad that they weren't there for me before. That's one thing my Mom said to me initially, or with my family right afterwards was how bad she felt that I went through this alone for this many years. They had read some literature from somewhere, you know the suicide thing and the depression, just feeling really, that they had failed me in some way. . . .So I think a lot of it [their proactiveness] has been kind of they have this need to overcome that.

Three parents demonstrated their proactiveness by such actions as facilitating a gay and lesbian youth group and verbally challenging strangers, acquaintances, and friends who are prejudiced and homophobic. Holly described her proactive mother as someone who will not stand for prejudice. She explained,

> And so I was talking to her the other day, the other day, I don't know, sometime after Christmas and she'd had a social at her house, and I guess

somebody was there and was asking about me, and my mom started talking about my partner and I. And they responded really negatively and were like, "Blah, blah blah, well, isn't that unfortunate, blah, blah, blah." And she just got up and she said, "Look, if you have a problem with this you leave, because you're not going to, you're not going to make any slurs, you're not going to make any jokes around me. This is my daughter and I love her. This is my other daughter [the daughter's partner] and I love her too."

Two children stated that their proactive parents enjoyed visiting with their gay friends and were not afraid to go to gay settings such as gay clubs. Also, three children reported that their supportive parents were more involved in the gay community than the children themselves. For example, Amy reported that her mother's reaction to her disclosure had resulted in both a positive parent-child relationship and a proactive mother, extensively involved in supporting the gay cause. This was evident as Amy stated,

> It just got closer [parent-child relationship after disclosure]. But after that [disclosure], I think it was probably a month or two before she got in touch with PFLAG. And then of course she got right involved in that, and she's just, I got the best out of it, the best that I could, I never dreamed that my mother would be, she's more out in the community than I am. She really is. You know. Everybody knows her. Like they'll come to me and if they find out that she's my mother, they've talked to her, or they know who she is, or they've met her, you know,something.

Lessons Learned: Advising Others

Lessons Learned: Advising Others was the fourth and final second order theme that developed from the data analysis of the transcripts of the adult children's interviews. Within this fourth core theme, the gay and lesbian adult children advised other teenagers or young adult children who may be struggling to disclose their

sexuality to their parents. Additionally, the adult children in this study described their advice for parents who may have gay or lesbian children. The adult children's advice was based on the lessons that they learned as a result of their experiences of disclosing their homosexuality to their parents.

Advice for children.

Based on the children's knowledge and experiences, they gave advice to other gay children who were trying to disclose to their parents. For example, five of the children indicated the importance of having a support system in place prior to disclosing to their parents. Regarding this, Amy stated,

> When you're [the gay child is] ready. When you know that this is how you are, and it's not a phase and you can sit there and you can tell your parents that, "It's not a phase. This is how I am, and this is how it's going to be. And I'm not going to outgrow this." . . . Yeah, be sure about yourself, and once you're sure of it tell your parents but have your support system. . . .Get your support group going. I say, you shouldn't come out to your parents before.

Having such a support system in place prior to disclosing was essential as five of the children suggested that they need to be prepared for varying reactions from their parents from that of shock to that of rejection. Dianne emphasized the importance of having a support system in case of adverse reactions. She commented, "Only come out if it feels right for your situation, be prepared for shock and rejection, make sure you have other support." Additionally, Luke echoed the same advice concerning the significance of having a support system in place prior to coming out. He described this necessity as follows:

> Probably the most important thing [when deciding to disclose to your parents] is to have, a good support group, like have a network of people who, are supportive of you, who can help you if, if your parents reject you, you know, emotionally, financially, whatever. I think it's it's important that, you be,

> secure enough in your own life that if, your parents left your life that, that void wouldn't become overpowering, that you would find some way of either coping with it, or filling it with something else. I would say that's probably, the biggest preparation step that an individual could take.

Two children commented on the importance of educating themselves on the process of coming out prior to disclosing to their parents. Regarding this educational process, David commented,

> And to have the resources [educational] if they're available to you use them. Especially when you are preparing to come out to your parents. There's a little booklet called, [I can't remember the name], read this before coming out to your parents. It's wonderful. It tells you all the different type of things to consider before coming out. Why are you coming out? Why do you feel it's necessary? That kind of thing. Look at your own reasons why? Are you financially dependent on your parents? Will your whole life collapse if. . . .So make sure, be informed and be prepared. There's no set perfect time to come out, there's no right time, I suppose.

These same adult children advised other gay children to make these educational and supportive materials and resources available for their parents when they disclose. Two children suggested that gay children need to be open and honest with their parents about their feelings. Also, one child recommended other gay children to be patient with their parents; whereas, two children believed that parents need to be aided in understanding their homosexual children and in accepting a different type of happiness. Ben believed in both the importance of the children educating themselves as well as utilizing educational materials and providing support telephone numbers for their parents when disclosing. Also, he emphasized the importance of having support systems in place in case of a negative reaction and finally giving the parents time to adjust to the news. His advice was as follows:

> Read up on everything you can. Know as much information, have information that you can present them [parents]. Have numbers where they can call and get some support. Have a fall back plan if things don't go well. Like have a place to stay . . . instead of, make sure your support systems in place before, because it can, from what I find, and from what I've read, parents, you do eventually come around, some parents they do take, they [say], "No, get out of my house. I don't want to see you." Some people I've know have been chased out of the house with a shotgun. But they [parents] usually come around eventually.

Interestingly, Rebecca believed that every child should disclose even if their parents react negatively, as their parents have the right to know. Regarding this, she explained,

> It's like, I don't know, these people [my parents], I wouldn't be here if it weren't for them, and I think it's their God given right to know, even if it hurts them, even if they disown you, they have to know. I can't, I've never known a parent to completely disown a child. I know it happens, but I have never actually been introduced to it. Even if they ignore it, still they know. Yeah, definitely just come out.

Advice for parents.

Regarding advice the adult children gave to other parents who may have gay children, five of the children suggested that the parents must become educated on the issue. Amy stressed the importance of parents educating themselves through books and through support networks. Her advice was evident as she explained the following:

> Read about it. Get, get there's lots of good books out there. The one that I gave my mom was written by two women who had, one had a daughter and one had a son come out to them, and they wrote a book about the whole

> experience, all the different angles and it was really good, so it was written from the parents' perspective. They should read up on it. Don't be embarrassed about it. . . .Read about it. Get involved with PFLAG. And and see from there, because that's a great support network. There's parents there, that have had the experiences and they can tell you how they dealt with it, and what their experience was and, everybody's experience is going to be kind of similar, there's going to be a lot of similarities in there and you can relate a lot.

Also, two of the children stressed the importance of reminding the parents that their children are the same people that they were prior to disclosure, that they haven't changed. Rebecca described her amazement over such rejection by parents. Regarding this, she explained,

> I am the exact same person as I was before I came out. Actually, now what I do behind closed doors is still none of their business. So, I mean, I have never understood how parents could not love somebody after doing that . . . after coming out. It amazes me. Some people's capacities are . . . it's quite strange actually . . . I mean, I'm no different than I was [before I disclosed]

Amy also agreed that gay and lesbian children do not change after they disclose, but rather their parents know more about them which she believed may result in a more open relationship. Her advice was evident as she commented,

> The person that came out to you is the same person that they were five minutes before they told you. Still the same person that you love. They're still going to be the same. You just know more about them now. And that's a good thing, not a bad thing. Because they don't have to hide anymore. They can tell you. And they can be open, and they can be honest.

Also, three children commented on the significance of parents understanding and supporting their children, as one child stated that if the children were not supported, the parents may lose them Regarding this, Jonathan reported,

> If someone is prepared to share information then I guess as a parent, there is an expectation for them to be receptive to that, and that's critical cause if it doesn't happen, then people aren't going to volunteer any information at all, then we've lost whatever . . . then communication breaks down. . . .I would suspect it breaks down really quickly, if I told them initially that I was gay and then mentioned this relationship and they never asked about it, then I'm not going to tell them anything, and we're back basically to square one. . . .You can't, you just can't do that in a constructive way with a gay and lesbian child, I guess . . . you're basically inviting distance, and if these people, if your child is looking for supportive people in their life, they're not going to be looking to you for very long or for very much longer if that's your reaction.

Other advice for parents included listen, do not panic, stay calm, be honest, be patient, show concern, validate them for disclosing, and communicate and be receptive to differences. Holly reminded parents to stay calm and really focus on communicating with their children, which involves listening and being open to their children when they disclose. She stated,

> "Listen and don't panic. Listen. Don't panic." You know, there's so much information out there for parents, . . . and their, their concerns are valid, . . . because they do, they want their kids to be happy, but if they just listen . . . then they'll hear. Instead of shutting down that line of communication. Because I think that you can't be supportive if you don't have the information.

Other advice given to the parents by the adult children involved educating their children from a young age that being gay is okay, and focus on the joy that their gay children's lives have brought them. Finally, Jamie believed that parents should ask themselves the following questions in order to aid their support and love of their gay children. Regarding this, he explained,

Unsuspecting, unsuspecting parents, that don't know if their children are gay or not, basically think to yourself, would you like, would you like your child not to have been born to you at all? Can can you remember any experiences, or any enjoyment that that child has given to you? Focus on that.

Summary of Children's Common Themes

This chapter was devoted to describing the core themes which developed as a result of the data analysis of the interviews with the gay and lesbian adult children. Indeed, each of the adult children were uniquely individual. However, when the children's stories of their experiences of their parent-child relationships (i.e., from adolescence to the present) were collectively examined, shared key themes became evident. These four second order themes, which were derived from the interviews, represented four core steps on the collective journey of the parent-child relationship as it evolved from adolescence to adulthood. These four core themes described the context for disclosure, the children's process of coming to terms with their sexuality, the children's process of disclosing to their parents and being accepted by their parents, and the lessons that the children learned from their experiences with their parents, resulting in them advising others.

In order to more fully understand the current parent-child relationships and their process, it seemed essential to explore the past parent-child relationships. As a result, the first core theme was Precursors to Coming Out. Within this theme, all of the children reported having to cope with conflicts in their past relationships with their parents, such as emotional difficulties and addictions involving a parent, and differences of opinion over finances, unacceptable behaviors, and family rules. Despite these reported difficulties, nine of the children reported an overall positive past relationship with their parent or parents. Seven of the children noted their

parents' continual availability, support, concern, involvement, help, and respect as being attributes of their past relationships

Coming to Terms with Sexuality was the second core theme which developed from the children's experiences. Within this second order theme, the adult children recounted their process of coming to terms with their homosexuality. Regarding this process, seven of the children reported feeling different from other children their age (some as young as four years). More specifically, all of the five boys stated that they felt different from a young age (i.e., some as early as four years old) and four of them realized they were gay and attracted to males when they were between the ages of 8 and 10 years. Three of these boys reported feelings of shame and guilt as a result of these differences. In contrast, only two of the girls stated feeling different at a young age. Three of the girls did not realize that they were gay until later in their lives, usually during their teen years.

Also, within this second core theme, the adult children described their inner struggles of coming to terms with their homosexuality. Regarding their inner struggles, six of the children reported experiencing depression and suicidal ideation during adolescence, with one child reporting a suicide attempt. More specifically, four of the males reported having struggled with depression and suicidal ideation in the past, with one male having attempted suicide. These males believed that their depression and suicidal ideation were partially or fully related to their struggles to come to terms with their homosexuality. In comparison, only two of the females recounted similar experiences of depression and suicidal ideation which they believed was partly or fully related to their struggles to come to terms with their sexuality. Three of the females commented on other difficulties that they endured. For instance, some recounted finding junior high and high school difficult as a result of not fitting in, being teased about being gay, and realizing that it was a homophobic environment.

Also, within this second core theme, Coming to Terms with Sexuality, the children discussed the risks that they took as a means of exploring , owning, and disclosing their sexuality. Regarding taking risks, seven children recounted disclosing to others, such as friends, relatives, and counsellors prior to disclosing to their parents. Additionally, six of the adult children explored and came to terms with their homosexuality by participating in gay positive activities. Interestingly, three of the males acknowledged that, when they finally disclosed, their personalities changed from being introverted to more extroverted.

Process of Coming Out to Parents: Moving Towards Acceptance was the third second order theme which was derived from the interviews with the gay and lesbian children. Within this third core theme, the children described the process of coming out to their parents which eventually resulted in acceptance. Regarding this process, six of the children reported being afraid to disclose to their parents as they feared their rejection. Within this coming out process, three children discussed their reasons for disclosing which included their sexuality and relationships becoming too difficult to hide, becoming tired of the lies and the lying, and having difficulties with their partners because of not disclosing their sexuality.

Also, six of the children reported that their parents' initial reactions included, such emotions as shock, concern, worry, and distress. Four parents revealed their fears over their children being discriminated against, the neighbors finding out, and/or the possibility of their children contracting the HIV disease. Two of the children indicated that their parents initially reacted negatively. However, within a short period of time, the negative responding parents became more accepting and supportive. Three children stated that their parents responded in a positive way with no evidence of shock or distress. Also, three children explained that their parents experienced feelings of sadness over loss of traditions and the possibility of not having grandchildren.

Also, within this third core theme, six of the children commented on the strengthened parent-child relationships which developed as a result of the disclosures. Despite some of the initial negative reactions of the parents, eight children reported that their parents were supportive and accepting of them. Seven of the children stated that their parents showed their support by being proactive about gay rights, such as their involvement in gay positive organizations (i.e., PFLAG and gay and lesbian youth groups), and their intolerance to homophobia and other prejudices. Three children noted that their parents were more involved in the gay community than they were themselves.

Finally, the fourth second order theme which developed from the children's interviews was Lessons Learned: Advising Others. Within this fourth theme, the gay and lesbian adult children expressed their advice for other children who may be struggling to disclose their sexuality to their parents. Regarding their advice, five of the children indicated the importance of having a support system in place prior to disclosing to their parents. This alternative support system seemed to be a necessity as half of the adult children asserted that everyone needs to be prepared for the parents' varying reactions from shock to rejection. Also, two adult children encouraged the use of educational materials and support resources both for the children and their parents when considering disclosure. In addition, the adult children gave their advice to parents who may have children who are disclosing. Half of the adult children suggested that the parents become educated about homosexuality. Also, two of the children reminded the parents that their gay children were still the same individuals as they were prior to disclosure. As well, three children described the importance of parents being understanding and supportive to their gay children.

Now, that the results of both the parents' and their respective adult children's experiences of the parent-child relationship have been presented, the focus turns to a discussion of the findings. The focus of Chapter Six is to explore and to discuss more

thoroughly some of the more meaningful findings which were highlighted and described in Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION

As a result of being members of a sexual minority, gay and lesbian youths are confronted with unique developmental tasks, different from those of their heterosexual peer group. They are faced with these unique tasks in part due to the prevailing perspective in society which assumes that everyone is heterosexual. Even when society admits to the existence of gay and lesbian members, a prevailing belief is that homosexuality exists only in adulthood. Many in society find it difficult to understand that these young people can know with certainty that they are homosexual or bisexual prior to adulthood. Despite the obstacles which researchers are faced in identifying these gay and lesbian adolescents, they do exist (Savin-Williams, 1995).

As a result of the sparse research in the area of gay and lesbian adolescent development, the role parents play has been neglected. Specifically, one area of research which has been neglected is the role that parents play in the healthy development of gay and lesbian adolescents (Savin-Williams, 1998). Few studies have investigated the response of parents to the disclosure or discovery of their children's homosexuality. Parents have been reticent to discuss their feelings about their gay and lesbian children. Gay and lesbian children have also reported not wanting their parents to discuss their feelings about their homosexuality (Savin-Williams & Dube, in press).

This present study is significant because it expanded and enhanced the understanding of the relationship between ten gay and lesbian adult children and their respective parents. This study provided rich data by including both the experiences of the children and their parents regarding the evolution of their parent-child relationship from adolescence to the present. To provide a broad scope of understanding, a qualitative approach was used. Specifically, a phenomenological methodology within

a psychological framework was utilized as this type of methodology enabled the researcher to discover and to understand more fully the phenomenon of the parent-child relationship (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In this study, both the gay and lesbian children and their respective parents described their experiences of the parent-child relationship. As a result of the data analysis, 17 first order themes were developed from the parents' data and 12 first order themes were derived from the children's data. These first order themes were developed into four second order themes for both the parents and the children. These themes were presented and described in Chapters Four and Five. In this section, the children's second order themes, Coming to Terms with Sexuality and the Process of Coming Out to Parent: Moving Towards Acceptance, as well as the parents' second order themes, Witnessing the Coming Out, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, Shifting Towards Acceptance, and Acts of Acceptance will be discussed in relation to the current research. Additionally, implications for counselling and future research will be presented. Finally, limitations of the present study will be explored.

Children's Process: Coming to Terms with Sexuality

Within this second order theme, the adult children described their process of coming to terms with their sexuality. As they recounted their memories of this process, the majority of them described feeling different as children. Also, the adult children described their inner struggles with trying to accept their homosexuality which became apparent in such forms as depression, suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts, and school problems. These inner struggles occurred mainly during adolescence. Additionally, the adult children discussed the risks that they took as a means of exploring, owning, and then finally disclosing their sexuality. These risk-taking behaviors also occurred in late adolescence and early adulthood. It became

evident from the children's experiences that the crucial process of coming to terms with their sexuality seemed to occur during their adolescent period.

Developmental Theories of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

As was discussed previously, adolescence is a complex developmental period which involves youths trying to integrate the many biological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes that are occurring in their world (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). The fundamental task of this developmental period of adolescence is identity formation (Cranston, 1992). Therefore, it is not surprising that the adult children in the present study struggled to come to terms with their sexual orientation during this period of development.

Erikson's Research on Identity Formation

Erikson (1963, 1968, & 1980) believed that it is essential for youths to develop a sense of identity in order to enter adulthood with a clear sense of who they are and what they expect and want from the outside world. In developing a realistic sense of self, they successfully resolve the dilemma of this psychosocial stage, thus being able to refocus their attention on developing intimate relationships. As discussed in Chapter Two, Erikson (1968) saw homosexuality as achieving a negative identity. Although Erikson's views of homosexuality are inappropriate given the culture of Canada in the 1990's, his theory can still be generally applied to gay and lesbian youths today.

It is not surprising that negative attitudes towards homosexuality existed at the time in which Erikson lived and studied. However, it is of concern that such negative attitudes still exist in portions of society today (Morrow, 1993). Such prejudice creates challenges for gay and lesbian adolescents (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996) and complicates their developmental period exponentially in comparison to that of their heterosexual peers (Borhek, 1988). Gay and lesbian youths are faced with trying to develop a positive sense of identity as members of a stigmatized sexual minority

(Teague, 1992). The social stigma of homosexuality makes it difficult for these youths in the identity formation process because they are typically left with feelings of guilt over having homoerotic feelings.

Additionally, gay and lesbian adolescents often do not have anyone to confide in regarding their feelings and often fear being rejected by their peers and family members. Such social stigma makes it difficult for gay and lesbian adolescents to find other gay and lesbian youths (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). As well, they lack contact with positive gay and lesbian adult role models (Dempsey, 1994). As these gay and lesbian youths realize that they may be attracted to the same-sex and be interested in behaviors and activities which society has labeled as inappropriate and deviant, they become fearful. Most often, these adolescents are afraid of being rejected, thus feeling both emotionally and socially isolated (Savin-Williams, 1995).

Applying Erikson's stage of identity confusion.

In respects to applying Erikson's psychosocial theory, these adolescents experience cognitive dissonance because their actual personal identity which involves being attracted to the same-sex is not consistent with their social identity of living the heterosexual life for which they have been trained and prepared (Gonsiorek, 1988; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). As a result of this dissonance, many are not able to immediately resolve this dilemma of this psychosocial stage successfully, thus resulting in a type of identity confusion. Maylon (1982) saw this period as an interruption in the identity formation process as the gay and lesbian adolescents continue to sustain a false identity until they are able to acknowledge and integrate their homosexuality. This process of integration typically occurred during the coming out process.

Many gay and lesbian adolescents are confused and struggle with their identities in large part due to their internalized homophobia. This internalized homophobia becomes evident in their lives as early as in childhood (Anderson, 1994;

Maylon, 1982). For example, children who later self identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual frequently develop an early awareness that they are different from their heterosexual peers. Typically, they are not able to identify this difference as being related to their sexuality, nor are they able to understand the true meaning of these feelings of being different. However, they do recognize rather quickly that this difference is viewed negatively by others. As they grow and mature, they understand this feeling of differentness more fully and they recognize society's negative reaction to such difference. They may integrate these negative feelings into their self-concept, resulting in varying amounts of internalized homophobia (Maylon, 1982).

Internalized homophobia was evident in many of the adult children's lives in the present study as the majority of them commented on feeling different as young as four to nine years of age. For example, Luke recognized his internalized homophobia as he described the following: "I came to the realization that I was somehow different. I didn't, at that age (four years old), didn't know what it was or what it meant. But also instinctively I somehow knew that, that it wouldn't be well received." Jamie's internalized homophobia was apparent as he explained, "But I remember just being really really ashamed. . . .Shame attached to the act afterwards, not during, not when I was with my secret friend, it was after, after the fact."

Internalized homophobia may be generalized to the entire self or self-concept. As a result, self-doubt and self-hatred develops which may lead to self-destructive behaviors, such as substance use and abuse, depression, suicidal ideation, and attempted and completed suicides (Maylon, 1982). With regards to the present study, the internalized homophobia in the adult children's lives was also evident as many of them acknowledged experiencing periods of depression and suicidal ideation during adolescence, with one participant reporting a suicide attempt. These adult children reported that their depression and suicidal ideation was either fully or partly related to their struggles with coming to terms with their sexual orientation. Although

most of the males reported depression and suicidal ideation, only some of the females acknowledged similar experiences.

Jamie's internalized homophobia was apparent as he explained the relationship between his suicide attempts and his struggle with his homosexuality.

> Throughout my whole life I've known I was gay. With any suicide attempt . . . that would have been a factor. . . .There's no denying that . . . I knew that what I was, . . . was wrong. The feelings that I was feeling were wrong and stuff.

Also, Sarah's internalized homophobia was evident during her period of depression as she explained,

> All I can really recall from that time was just sort of, just a big emptiness, . . . not being able to see where my life would fit into the future. . . .Because I think that I had friends around me who knew what they wanted. Who knew they were going to university and knew they wanted to go and study this or that and people talking about how many babies they wanted to have. I kept thinking there must be something wrong with me because I don't want any of that.

Even though the majority of the females did not experience a period of depression and suicidal ideation, they did comment on other problems which they indicated were related to their struggles with their sexuality, such as difficulties in junior and senior high school as a result of not fitting in with their peers, being teased about being gay, not feeling safe in school, and feeling ignorant regarding the meaning of their homoerotic feelings. Certainly, the difficulties reported by the males and females seem to be related to the stigmatization that gay and lesbian adolescents endure as a result of their sexuality.

Marcia's View of Gay and Lesbian Adolescents

Although all of the adult children in this current study reported coming to terms with their sexual orientation during adolescence, another developmental theorist who did not acknowledge this process of identity formation in the sexual minority youths was James Marcia. Over the past three decades, he completed research further developing Erikson's concept of identity achievement (Marcia, 1980, 1994). He, like Erikson, overlooked the unique needs of gay and lesbian adolescents and he never addressed whether his four identity statuses (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement) would also be applicable to gay and lesbian adolescents in resolving their identity-identity diffusion dilemma.

Although Marcia (1980) did not address the unique needs of gay and lesbian adolescents, he did indicate that identity formation involves the commitment to a sexual orientation as well as a commitment to an ideology and a specific vocation. However, he never addressed what committing to a sexual orientation might entail, in particular the differences that may exist in committing to a sexual minority in comparison to a sexual majority. He explained that the process of identity formation involves the integration of all of the components of identity. This process occurs as the adolescents choose that which they will keep and they decide that which they will abandon. Marcia believed that one of the reasons that adolescents do not develop an identity or only form a partial identity is that they have difficulty letting go of the familiar elements of the past and grasping on firmly to the uncertainty of the future (Marcia, 1980). In light of Marcia's explanation of identity formation, gays' and lesbians' identity formation would seem to involve added complexity as they are not only letting go of the familiarity of the past but they are also letting go of what society expects and values and will be choosing that which society still deems, for the most part, as inappropriate (Savin-Williams, 1995).

Applying Marcia's four statuses.

In applying Marcia's (1980, 1994) four statuses of resolving identity-identity diffusion to the experiences of the adult children who participated in the present study, the three statuses which seem most applicable are identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. These three statuses will be applied mainly with regard to the formation of the children's sexual orientation, as their ideologies and vocational choices were not explored in the present study.

The majority of the adult children reported periods of depression and suicidal ideation and one participant indicated a suicide attempt. These adult children indicated that their depression, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide were partly or fully related to their coming to terms with being gay. It would seem that during this period of time the children were in the identity foreclosure stage as their depression and suicidal behavior might have been a result of their efforts in trying to commit to living a heterosexual life which they knew that both their parents and society had expected of them. Because of these expectations, these children did not explore their homosexuality, thus resulting in depression and suicidal tendencies. However, this same period of depression, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide could be interpreted as the identity moratorium stage. Because the children recognized and began to explore their homoerotic feelings, they began to feel depressed and suicidal as they were not quite ready to commit to living a homosexual identity due to their internalized homophobia and a homophobic society. As a result, an identity crisis developed.

Also, within the process of coming to terms with their sexuality, the gay and lesbian adult children discussed the risks that they took as means of exploring, owning, and then finally disclosing their sexuality. With regards to exploring their sexuality, many of the children recounted participating in various gay-related functions such as going to gay clubs and dances and dating people of the same-sex.

Some indicated the importance of moving away from home in order to explore their homosexuality. Regarding taking additional risks, the majority of the children reported disclosing to others, such as friends, relatives, and counsellors prior to disclosing to their parents. Some saw such disclosures as a part of their journey of self-acceptance. Indeed, during this period of taking risks, exploring, owning, and disclosing their homosexuality, these children were at the identity achievement stage of Marcia' theory. They had achieved their identity as gay and lesbian adolescents and young adults because they had explored their homosexuality and committed to their gay and lesbian identities.

Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation Stage Theories

As a result of the pathologizing of homosexuality throughout history, developmental psychologists and researchers have largely ignored investigating the development of homosexual identity (Herdt, 1989). Such lack of attention given to the identity formation process of homosexuality by traditional mainstream developmental researchers was evident in both Erikson's (1968) and Marcia's research (1980, 1994). However, despite the lack of studies by the more traditional developmental researchers, numerous models of homosexual identity formation have emerged. Specifically in the 1970s, this process of identity formation was well researched with gay and lesbian adults. Yet, despite the wealth of research on gay and lesbian adults, there has been limited research completed on the identity formation, also known as the "coming out" process, of gay and lesbian adolescents (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993).

This lack of research has been largely related to the dominant cultural assumption that homosexuality is a product of adulthood (Savin-Williams, 1995). Despite this cultural assumption, recent studies have reported that gay and lesbian identity formation may begin in childhood, adolescence, or any stage of adulthood (Cass, 1979; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989; Remafedi, 1987a). Indeed,

some people do not form their identities as gays and lesbians until their twenties or later (Kitzinger, 1987; Nichols, 1990). However, most of the research has reported that the entire process of identity formation typically occurs during adolescence (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Joseph, Adib, Joseph, & Tal, 1991; McDonald, 1982). For example, Remafedi (1987a) found that same-sex attractions were typically reported between childhood and puberty. Therefore, because the age of coming out has dropped significantly in the past 20 years, both gays and lesbians are recognizing their homosexuality at an earlier developmental stage, specifically during adolescence (Herdt, 1989; Troiden, 1989).

This process of identity formation, or coming out, has been recognized by the stage theories as being a slow developmental process occurring over an extended period of time, involving the acceptance and integration of a gay or lesbian identity (Cass, 1979; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1979, 1989). These theories have also recognized that progress through these certain stages may occur moving back-and-forth between the stages or up-and-down between them. Thus, characteristics of a specific stage may extend into another stage or reoccur at other stages or in different ways depending on the individual (Troiden, 1989). Although these stage theories are similar in content and process, they differ in the number and labeling of the stages (Teague, 1992).

Applicability of Troiden's Stage Theory of Identity Formation

Consistent with the previous research, the gay and lesbian participants in the present study reported struggling with and resolving their sexual orientation during adolescence and into early adulthood. In this section, their reported experiences will be compared to Troiden's stage theory of identity formation.

Sensitization.

Troiden (1988) developed a four stage theory of identity formation which comprise the following four stages: sensitization, identity confusion, identity

assumption, and identity commitment. The first stage of sensitization typically occurs before puberty and this stage is characterized by generalized feelings of marginality. It is during this stage that the children recognize that they are different from their peer group. Within the second order theme, Coming to Terms with Sexuality, the majority of the participants reported feeling different as children in comparison to their same-sex peers. All of the males indicated feeling different from a very young age. Ben commented on his feelings during this stage of sensitization as he explained, "I felt different, but I could never put a finger on it. . . .I didn't seem to be like the other boys . . . something wasn't the same." Additionally, the majority of the females recounted feeling different as children in comparison to their same-sex peers as they reported having crushes on and being attracted to their female teachers and female friends.

These accounts of feeling different from an early age which were reported in this current study are consistent with the findings from the research of Bell et al. (1981). Their study indicated that both gays and lesbians were more likely to report feeling either "very much" or "somewhat" different than their heterosexual same-sex peers during grade school. Also, in Troiden's (1979) retrospective study of 150 gay males, 72% of the males indicated experiencing a sense of differentness or apartness prior to adolescence. These males reported feeling different as a result of feelings of alienation and gender inadequacy. Troiden (1988) believed that these childhood memories of feeling different would take on additional significance as the individuals began to recognize their new emerging gay or lesbian identity.

Identity confusion.

The second stage of Troiden's theory is identity confusion. During this stage, the gay and lesbian adolescents become aware of their same-sex attraction. In the present study, the majority of the males realized their same-sex attraction and their homosexuality between the ages of 8 to 10 years of age. Only one of the males self-

identified as gay in his late teens (age of 18 years). All of the female participants self-identified as lesbian during their early to late teenage years. These present findings are supported by other studies which reported that gay males recognized their homosexual feelings at the average age of 13 years (Bell et al., 1981; McDonald, 1982). Similarly, Remafedi (1987a) found that 31% of gay male and bisexual adolescents and young adults were aware of their homosexual feelings in childhood while 69% identified these feelings in early adolescence. These gay and bisexual males self-identified on average at age 14 years.

In comparison, lesbians identified becoming aware of their homoerotic feelings between the ages 14 to 16 years (Bell et al., 1981). More recent research has also reported significant gender differences; females were on average a year older than males (13.9 and 12.5 respectively) when they first recognized their same-sex feelings and when they self-identified with certainty that they were lesbian or gay (15.9 and 14.6 respectively) (Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg, Hunter, Exner, Gwadz, & Keller, 1996). The majority of males in the present study reported that they recognized and identified their homosexuality at an earlier age than was reported by the majority of other studies. Such young ages (8 and 10 years) may be reflective of a real change which is occurring as current generations are identifying themselves as gays and lesbians at earlier ages. However, these younger ages may also be reflective of a retrospective bias which will be discussed in more detail later (Savin-Williams, 1995).

Not surprisingly, many adolescents, as previously discussed, experience cognitive dissonance as result of recognizing their same-sex attraction and homoerotic feelings. Such dissonance emerges because the homoerotic feelings are inconsistent with the adolescents' own internalized expectations as well as society's heterosexual bias, thus resulting in identity confusion (Cass, 1979; Herdt, 1989; Troiden, 1988). Many gay and lesbian adolescents experience such dissonance and confusion due to

their own internalized homophobia (Malyon, 1982), resulting often in feelings of guilt and shame (Minton & McDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989). In turn, secrecy and isolation result with the latter being reported as the greatest stressor with which gay and lesbian adolescents are faced (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988). This isolation is associated with the gay and lesbian youths increased vulnerability to additional stressors and negative outcomes such as school problems, substance abuse, depression, suicidal attempts, and completed suicides (Savin-Williams, 1994).

This identity confusion stage was apparent in the lives of the gay and lesbian participants. The majority of the children recounted experiencing periods of depression and suicidal ideation which they believed was partly or fully related to their coming to terms with their sexual orientation. Many of the males experienced such depression and suicidal tendencies, with one reporting an attempted suicide. One of these males did not report depression but rather a period of low-esteem which he related to his struggle with his sexuality. In comparison, only some of the females recounted periods of depression and suicidal ideation. However, many of the females did report other difficulties including school difficulties, such as not fitting in, being teased about being gay, and not feeling safe, which are consistent with this stage of identity confusion.

The majority of adolescents in this current study seemed to experience depression and suicidal ideation as a result of trying to deny or suppress their feelings of homosexuality. For example, Luke described his depression and efforts to suppress his feelings as follows :

> That's actually probably the reason why I did come out was I got to a point where I guess my defenses, my wall was starting to crack and I couldn't cope with anything anymore. . . .Trying to suppress how I felt was like a 24 hour occupation. And I was getting to a point where I was having problems functioning.

Other ways of coping with this stage of identity formation are repairing or trying to eradicate these homosexual feelings through such means as therapy. Avoidance is used as gay and lesbian adolescents try to focus their energy and efforts on the opposite sex or they will avoid gay literature in fear that it may confirm their greatest fear. Also, some adolescents try to redefine their homosexual feelings and behaviors by saying that it is only a phase or they are only experimenting. Adolescents may remain in this stage of identity confusion until they have resolved their dissonance, thereby accepting their homosexuality and arriving at the third stage of identity formation which is identity assumption (Troiden, 1988).

Identity assumption.

During this stage of identity assumption, the adolescents tolerate, recognize and accept their gay and lesbian sexuality and begin to disclose their homosexuality to others (Troiden, 1988). This process of disclosing to others is often referred to as the beginning stages of a larger process called coming out (Coleman, 1982). Within this identity assumption stage, coming out is referring to the process of disclosing one's sexuality continually to a changing audience (Lee, 1977), in comparison to referring to the entire developmental process of gay and lesbian identity formation (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Hallmarks of this stage "are self-definition as homosexual, identity tolerance and acceptance, regular association with other homosexuals, sexual experimentation, and exploration of the homosexual subculture" (Troiden, 1988, p. 109).

The identity assumption stage was apparent in the first order theme called Taking Risks: Exploring, Owning, and Disclosing Sexuality. Within this theme, the majority of the participants described their risk-taking behaviors which involved disclosing their homosexuality to others, such as friends, relatives, and counsellors, prior to disclosing to parents. David explained the importance of disclosing his sexuality in the process of his own self-acceptance. He stated, "I think once I said the

word gay and allowed myself to be a little more of who I was, maybe not even with a lot of people, just with my mother I felt a lot more at ease with myself."

Additional evidence of the assumption stage was apparent as many of the gay and lesbian children reported participating in various gay positive functions such as going to gay clubs and dating the same-sex. Meeting other gay and lesbian people is significant in facilitating the formation of their identities as well as providing a sense of community which lessens the past feelings of isolation (Troiden, 1988). Also, these positive interactions with other gays and lesbians begin the process of re-examining one's internalized homophobia and developing a more positive view of homosexuality (Troiden, 1988). The process of reconstructing homosexuality into a positive identity was apparent as some children indicated that their personalities changed after they disclosed, as they appeared to go from being introverted to more extroverted. This was evident as David explained, "Once I came out and finally decided that I felt at least comfortable enough to say that, more of me started coming out and being who I was and open to knowing people and having them know me."

Identity commitment.

When gay and lesbian adolescents have recognized and accepted their homosexuality, they enter the final stage of identity commitment. During this stage, which typically occurs when the individuals are in their 20s, a commitment is made to living their lives as gays and lesbians. At this stage, the gay and lesbian individuals have accepted and recognized homosexuality as a positive valid identity. They demonstrate their acceptance and commitment by continuing to disclose their sexuality to other people, both homosexual and heterosexual. Additionally, during this stage they become involved in same-sex love relationships (Troiden, 1988).

Regarding the gay and lesbian participants in the present study, they appeared to be well within the identity commitment stage. They have recognized their feelings of differentness as children and resolved their struggle with their sexuality by taking

risks and exploring their same-sex attractions. Consequently, they recognized and accepted their homosexual identities which was reinforced by their disclosing to others. Indeed, taking the ultimate risk of disclosing to their parents reflected their commitment to their homosexuality.

Parents' Process: Witnessing the Coming Out

In this section, the parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship will be explored. Specifically, Witnessing the Coming Out which was one of the second order themes derived from the parents' data will be discussed in relation to the current literature. Within this theme, the parents described their children's painful process of coming to terms with their homosexuality which typically occurred during adolescence. The parents reported on the entire process including their perceptions of their children's fears about disclosing, reasons for disclosing, and any hints that their children may have given about their sexual orientation prior to disclosure. Most importantly, the parents described a shifting process that they witnessed as their children moved from a place of dark pain and depression to one of acceptance. This shifting process resulted with the children having recognized, disclosed, and accepted their homosexuality.

Experiencing Pain: Children Struggling with Their Sexuality

The previous section concentrated on the children's experiences and perceptions of their struggle to come to terms with their sexuality. This section examines the same process through the parents' eyes. Regarding the children's efforts in coming to terms with their homosexuality, the majority of the parents reported that their children struggled with depression. In addition to depression, many of the children experienced suicidal ideation, and two attempted suicide. Regarding the male children, the majority of the parents indicated that their sons had struggled with depression and suicidal ideation, with one attempting suicide during adolescence.

According to the parents, the periods of depression and suicidal ideation were partly or fully related to their male children's struggles with their sexuality. In comparison to the parents' perceptions of their sons' experiences, the majority of the sons also reported that they had experienced both depression and suicidal ideation, with one son attempting suicide. The sons validated their parents' perceptions that their struggles with depression and suicidal tendencies were also related to their sexual orientation.

Although most of the parents of the females reported that their daughters had experienced a negative period during adolescence, only one of these daughters went through a depressed period similar to the sons which included an attempted suicide. The negative period for the other daughters was characterized by being withdrawn, temperamental, having a distant relationship with parents or being rebellious, secretive, and deceitful. These parents also believed that their daughters' struggles during this negative period was partly or fully related to their struggles with their sexuality. The daughters also validated their parents' perceptions of their adolescent experiences with depression and suicidal tendencies. The majority of the daughters indicated that they had struggled with a difficult period which was characterized by school difficulties, such as not feeling like they fit in, not feeling safe, and being teased about being gay. The only discrepancy noticed between the perceptions of the parents and their daughters involved one daughter recognizing past depression and suicidal ideation which was unknown to the parent.

Prevalence of Depression and Suicide

Despite this one previously described discrepancy, the parents' perceptions were overall consistent with and reflective of the experiences reported by the children. This agreement between the parents' perceptions and the children's experiences strengthens both the validity and the richness of the data. Additionally, it magnifies the dark reality that the majority of the children in this study experienced a negative period during adolescence which consisted of depression, suicidal ideation, attempted

suicide and school difficulties which was related to their struggles with their sexuality.

These reports of depression, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide among gay and lesbian adolescents are consistent with the findings of the 1989 Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide in the United States. In this report, Gibson (1994) reported that the leading cause of death among gay and lesbian adolescents is suicide as both gays and lesbians have a two to three times higher chance of attempting suicide than their heterosexual peers. Gibson (1994) indicated that these gay and lesbian youths account for approximately 30% of the completed suicides reported each year in the United States.

These American statistics of the prevalence of suicide among gay and lesbian youths are similar to Canadian findings. For example, Bagley & Tremblay (1997) in a study of suicidal behaviors in males surveyed 750 males ranging in ages from 18 to 27. With this sample of males, almost 13% identified as homosexual or bisexual. These homosexual males reported significantly higher rates of past suicidal ideation and attempts than their heterosexual peer group. Additionally, 62.5% of the past suicide attempters were gay-oriented males; these gay and bisexual males had a 13.9 times higher risk of attempting suicide than their heterosexual male peers.

Another study examined suicidality, stress, and gay-related stress among 131 male gay and bisexual youths who were provided counselling services in New York city. Thirty-nine percent of these youths attempted suicide in the past (Rotheram-Borus et al., 1994) in comparison to 11% to 16% of heterosexual youths in high schools who reported past suicide attempts (Adcock et al., 1991). Of those 39% who attempted suicide in the past, 52.1% of them reported having made more than one attempt. Interestingly, general life stress was not higher among suicide attempters, but rather gay-related stressors such as disclosing to family or having their sexual

orientation discovered as being gay were significantly more common among suicide attempters.

As discussed previously, gay and lesbian adolescents are faced with additional stressors in comparison to their heterosexual peer group as a result of struggling to come to terms with their homosexuality. For example, Gibson (1994) described the special hardships with which gay and lesbian youths are face as follows:

> First, they must come to understand and accept themselves in a society that provides them with little positive information about who they are and negative reactions to their inquiries. Second, they must find support among significant others who frequently reject them. Finally, they must make a social adaptation to their gay or lesbian identity. They must find where they belong and how they fit in with a social structure that either offers no guidelines for doing so or tells them that they have no place (p. 19).

Prevalence of School Related Difficulties Involving Peer Abuse

As adolescents try to resolve their homoerotic feelings with their internalized homophobia (Maylon, 1982), they often develop dissonance (Cass, 1979; Herdt, 1989; Troiden, 1988). Often this time of dissonance and identity confusion results in the adolescents feeling isolated (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Such isolation is related to their increased vulnerability to other negative stressors and outcomes such as depression, suicidal ideation, attempted and completed suicides, substance abuse, prostitution, and school related problems. In addition, to the depression and suicidal tendencies, some of the adolescents in the present study were described by their parents as having experienced a difficult or negative period which the children described as being related to school problems.

These school related difficulties are examples of the peer issues which arise especially for gays and lesbians during adolescence. During this period of development, conformity is the rule and it is strongly implemented by peer pressure,

which creates an extremely stressful period for gay and lesbian youths. According to Martin & Hetrick (1988), 95% of the gay and lesbian adolescents in their study reported that they often experienced feelings of aloneness and emotional isolation from their peers as a result of their sexuality. Other research found that 55% of the male adolescents described regular verbal abuse from their school peers. Additionally, 30% reported being physically assaulted, with approximately 50% of the assaults occurring on school grounds (Remafedi, 1987a).

The majority of the peer abuse which was reported occurred mainly in school settings with many of the gay and lesbian youths reporting that they were afraid of having their homosexuality discovered. They said they were tired of hiding their homosexuality but still afraid that if they participated in school activities that they might be attacked and humiliated. Not surprisingly, 32% of these gay and lesbian adolescents wanted to quit school (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). As a result of such peer harassment, these adolescents were faced with numerous additional school related problems such as poor performance, skipping classes, and quitting school (Hunter & Schaecher, 1990). Additional research indicated that 28% of gay and bisexual male youths quit school prior to their high school graduation and approximately 53% of those who stayed in school reported that their academic performance deteriorated (Remafedi, 1987b).

Out of Darkness: Coming into Their Own

In light of such peer abuse, it is not surprising that so many gay and lesbian adolescents experience isolation, depression, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, and school related problems. However, the most hopeful finding of the current study is described within the first order theme, Out of Darkness: Coming into Their Own.

The Positive Impact of Parental Support and Acceptance

This promising finding is that the gay and lesbian adolescents, who struggled through their adolescence, coping with depression, suicidal ideation and behaviors as

well as school related problems, survived this negative period. Despite the increased stressors and negative outcomes related to being a gay or lesbian youth, the gay and lesbian adolescents in the present study survived this difficult time and they safely moved from this negative place to a much more positive one of self-acceptance.

Regarding the factors that contributed to this shifting from a negative to a more positive place, the parents stated that it involved the children coming out or disclosing to them and others as they came to accept their sexual orientation. In turn, the parents' acceptance of their children's homosexuality was vital in this shifting process. This was evident as the majority of the parents in this current study believed that it was their support, love, and acceptance that was key in aiding their children a safe journey to the other side of this negative period. For example, Faye believed that it was her and her husband's acceptance of their son's homosexuality that saved him from suicide. She explained, "I think, had my husband and I rejected him, I think he would have committed suicide. Yeah I think if the family would have rejected him, he would have committed suicide." In addition, Reg and Debbie described their son's relief when he disclosed his homosexuality and they in turn accepted him. They explained,

> He's much happier, now that he's come out to us, and who ever he wants to come out with, the weight that's that has come off his shoulders. If other parents could experience, and I consider this a positive experience, to see your kid, see so much relief in such a short period of time.

Prevalence of Parental Abuse and Rejection

Indeed, a great source of stress for many gay and lesbian adolescents is in regards to their relationship with their parents (Savin-Williams, 1998). This concern over the parent-child relationship was evident in Martin & Hetrick's (1988) study which indicated that the second most frequently cited reason by gay and lesbian youths for seeking counselling services was family conflict. These adolescent clients

reported feelings of isolation and alienation because they feared their parents' discovery of their sexual orientation. Also, other adolescent clients indicated these same feelings of isolation as a result of being abused and expelled from the home due to discovery or disclosure of their homosexuality (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

Additionally, 93% of a college sample of gay males indicated that disclosing their sexuality to their parents was a "problem" for them that was "somewhat" to "extremely troubling" (D'Augelli, 1991). It is not surprising that gay and lesbian adolescents experience disclosing their homosexuality to their parents as a stressor because much research has shown that such disclosure may result in abuse and rejection. For example, Hunter (1990) indicated that the highest percentage of physical abuse which was experienced by 500 mostly African-American and Latino New York City sexual minority adolescents occurred within the home involving the family. They reported abuse such as ridicule, physical battery, and rape, resulting in some of the youths attempting suicide. Pilkington & D'Augelli (1995) reported that close to 60% of the gay and lesbian youths had suffered some form of verbal or physical abuse from a member of the family. Thirty-six percent reported verbal abuse and 10 percent suffered physical abuse. With regards to physical abuse, the females were abused significantly more often than the males. Most often, the mothers (22%) were the abusers, then the brothers (15%), the fathers (14%), and the sisters (9%) (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995).

As evident from this research, there are numerous negative ways in which the parents and family members can and do react to their children's disclosure of their homosexuality. Because disclosing to parents is such a concern and stressor for many gay and lesbian adolescents, it would seem that the parents' love, acceptance, and support of their children's homosexuality in this current study would aid this shifting process from a negative place of depression to a positive place of self-acceptance.

Other significant support networks which were reported by some of the parents in the present study were friends of the children and professional counselling programs.

Parents' Process of Coming to Accept Their Children's Homosexuality

Research that has been completed in the area of the parent-child relationship has been investigated mainly from the perceptions of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents. For the most part, researchers have ignored the parents' perspective of the parent-child relationship and/or their feelings and reactions to having a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child in the family. This is mostly a result of parents not wanting to discuss their homosexual children and/or gay and lesbian children not wanting to volunteer their parents to discuss their homosexuality (Savin-Williams, 1998). This current study is significant because it explored both the children and their respective parents' experiences of the parent-child relationship from adolescence to the present.

Emotional Reactions to Disclosure

Within this second order theme, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, the parents described the various reactions that they experienced following their children's disclosures or on realization of their children's homosexuality. The parents' reactions to the disclosures described vividly a wide variety of emotions and feelings, such as fear, self-blame, relief, shock, and surprise. These various emotions are reflective of the feelings reported during the second stage of Devine's (1984) five stage theory of acceptance.

Based on his therapeutic work with families with gay and lesbian children, DeVine (1984) indicated that the families or parents progress through a serious of stages of awareness and acceptance of their children's homosexuality. DeVine (1984) believed that not all families progress through all of these stages as some will stay fixated at certain stages. However, he indicated that the progression through these stages are controlled by three key factors of the family as a system. These three

factors included the "cohesion" or closeness of the members in the family, the "regulative structures" or the spoken and unspoken rules and expectations which control the behaviors of the family, and the "family themes" which dictate how the family wants the community to view them in the future.

The first stage is subliminal awareness. During this initial stage, the parents typically have a sense or suspect that their children are gay or lesbian (DeVine, 1984). This subliminal awareness was evident in this current study as some of the parents reported that they had missed signs or hints from their children that they were gay prior to disclosures. However, others stated that they had received mixed messages because they were confused that their children were dating the opposite sex. Interestingly, very few parents indicated that they had no idea that their children were gay prior to their children's disclosures, thus having some awareness of their children's homosexuality.

The second stage of Devine's theory is called impact. It is at this stage that the children disclose to their parents. The disclosures typically result in a crisis atmosphere with the parents reporting a variety of emotions, such as fear, guilt, failure, denial, and loss of control. In this current study, the second order theme, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, is synonymous to Devine's stage of impact as the parents experienced a wide range of feelings in reaction to their children's disclosures. For example, the majority of parents reported feelings of fear on first hearing their children's disclosures. These parents were afraid of their children being stigmatized and discriminated against. Some parents had fears over their children's safety and health.

After the initial disclosure, some of the parents felt self-blame as they blamed themselves, birth control use, the absence of a parent, their spouse, the toys given to the children, or the sports the children played for their children's homosexuality. Several parents expressed feelings of relief after their children disclosed as they

finally knew the reason for their children's past struggles and behaviors, and finally they understood their children. For example, Faye described her feelings of relief when her son finally disclosed his homosexuality, "And then of course like you have so many emotions, but the strongest one I remember is the feeling, 'I finally know. I finally understood', like it finally gave me understanding of what was bothering him. It was almost a relief."

Additionally, some parents described feelings of surprise and/or shock. A few of the parents initially reacted negatively but then became supportive and accepting. After the initial reactions to the disclosure, many of the parents experienced feelings of loss, sadness, or regret over the possibility of not having grandchildren. The majority of the parents acknowledged having feelings of regret over their children not disclosing earlier to them which may have added to their children's painful struggles. Faye described her regrets over her son not disclosing to her sooner. She explained, "It pained me that I, and . . . that is a big pain I have now, because I feel I let him down, that he didn't come earlier to me. I failed him." Also, many parents had regrets over their past intolerant behaviors and regretted that they had not been more gay positive in the past.

Shifting Towards Acceptance

After the parents experienced their emotional reactions to their children's disclosures or discovery of their children's homosexuality, there seemed to be a shift in the parents' process. This third second order theme, Shifting Towards Acceptance, involved the parents moving from a place of initial raw emotions to a place where they began to understand and to accept their children's homosexuality. As this shifting process occurred, the parents began to gain insight into their children's past behaviors. The parents became more tolerant of others' differences as they reported personal self-growth. Additionally, as a result of this shifting process, the parents

acknowledged that their relationship with their children became stronger as they continued to move forward accepting their children's differences.

This process of Shifting Towards Acceptance does not reflect Devine's (1984) third stage called adjustment. According to this stage, the family or parents try to restablize the system. Typically, they try to achieve this task by encouraging or persuading the gay or lesbian children that they are not really gay. If the children will not change their homosexuality, then the parents request that the children keep their sexual orientation a secret, thus maintaining the respectability of the family in the community (DeVine, 1984). This stage was not reflected in the experiences of the parents who participated in this current study as none of them reported trying to change their children's homosexuality. Additionally, no one described encouraging their children to keep their sexuality a secret.

This adjustment stage may not be reflective of these parents' experiences as a result of the family themes which dictate their actions and reactions. According to DeVine (1984), there are three themes which are likely to create a lot of stress and conflict for families with gay or lesbian members. They are as follows: "maintain respectability at all costs" which involves rejecting the gay family member because they do not want to lose status in the community, "be as our religion teaches us to be" which often means rejecting homosexuality and their children, in keeping with the church's beliefs, and "as a family we can solve our own problems" which implies the gay family member is the problem and the family is suggesting their lack of openness and willingness to new beliefs and values (Strommen, 1989). This present study did not involve the whole family or system but rather it focused on the parents and their gay or lesbian child. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss the possible themes which may have dictated the behaviors and actions of each of the families as a whole.

However, the process of Shifting Towards Acceptance seems to reflect Devine's (1984) fourth stage of resolution. At this resolution stage, the parents begin

to let go of their past heterosexual expectations for their gay and lesbian children. For some, this letting go will involve a type of grieving process, grieving the loss of one's expectations. The first order theme of Loss of Grandchildren which was discussed in the previous stage would also fit in this resolution stage as the majority of parents reported feelings of loss and sadness regarding the possibility of not having grandchildren. In addition, a few parents like Gillian also experienced a sense of loss over not participating in the traditions that are typically celebrated with heterosexuality. Regarding her feelings she explained,

> Probably aren't going to have any grandchildren from your daughter and you're not probably going to have a wedding you know and you're not going to do some of those things. So those milestones aren't going to be there for you and there's some grieving that goes with that.

As a result of letting go of these past heterosexual expectations, the parents began to accept their children's homosexuality. Consequently, they became more tolerant as they challenged and dispelled their own internalized homophobia. As they actively confronted these homophobic myths, they became more tolerant and accepting of differences (DeVine, 1984). This resolution stage or shifting towards acceptance process was evident in the present study as numerous parents reported becoming more tolerant and accepting of their children and of others' differences. They stated that they experienced a type of self-growth. With regards to self-growth, Bob explained,

> I heard parents in PFLAG talk about the son that they knew, was gone and they had a new son. But I think actually, in this case, hopefully, Jonathan feels he's got a new father. A little more understanding than, and . . . not so critical.

As a result of this shifting process or resolution period, some parents stated that they began to understand their children's past behaviors such as reasons why they

were depressed and suicidal. Also, many explained that their relationship with their children became even closer following the disclosures. Reasons for the stronger parent-child relationship were cited as being due to no more secrets and being more tolerant and open to differences.

Dispelling one's internalized homophobia was also clearly reflected in the Moving Forward theme. The parents challenged their old prejudiced ways of thinking and began to see homosexuality as a positive sexual orientation. Having increased exposure and contact with gays and lesbians aided this process of dispelling old beliefs. Also reading accurate educational materials about gay and lesbians issues as well as attending support groups for parents or meeting with other gay positive parents increased their understanding and acceptance of their children's homosexuality. Other factors that were reported to aid the parents understanding were as follows: talking to other family members and professionals, faith in God, and watching their homosexual children struggle with depression and suicidal behaviors in the past.

Acts of Acceptance

Within the fourth second order theme, Acts of Acceptance, the parents described the many ways that they embraced and accepted their gay and lesbian children. They discussed their various efforts to be proactive in their gay and lesbian children's lives. As a result of being at this stage of acceptance, these parents were able to give their advice to other parents who may have gay or lesbian children. They also provided their advice for any gay or lesbian children who may be struggling to disclose their sexuality to their parents. Finally, they showed their acceptance of their gay and lesbian children by disclosing to others.

The second order theme, Acts of Acceptance, seems to be consistent with DeVine's (1984) fifth and final stage of integration. At this stage, the parents have the ability to accept the new role of their gay and lesbian children. As they accepted the

new role of their homosexual children, they began to demonstrate their acceptance and their new gay positive perspective through their behaviors and their actions. These Acts of Acceptance or this stage of integration was evident as all of the parents in this current study indicated that they had arrived at some level of acceptance regarding their gay or lesbian children.

These parents demonstrated their acceptance in the following ways: accepting and supporting their gay children and their partners, being happy for their gay children's meaningful same-sex relationships, treating their gay and lesbian children the same way that they treat their heterosexual children, and experiencing the pain of a break-up between their gay and lesbian children and their partners similarly to the pain experienced when heterosexual children end a relationship with their partners. Other ways that parents showed their acceptance was by appreciating children's choices in same-sex partners and recognizing the positives of having gay or lesbian children in the family. For example, Faye described her full acceptance of her gay son as she explained,

> It's fully accepted. . . .They don't have to pretend like they're just friends, if they a hold hands or whatever, or give each other a kiss it's perfectly all right. . . .Like, it's no different as it is with our heterosexual son, we don't treat them differently. . . .We don't treat them differently, like it's as accepted for our homosexual son as we accept it from our heterosexual son to show their affection to, for their partners.

Additionally, many of the parents demonstrated their acceptance and integration of their children's homosexuality in to the family through their proactive efforts. The parents were proactive as they became advocates for gay and lesbian issues by such means as educating others and by not tolerating any form of homophobia. Finally, many of the parents indicated their love and acceptance of their children's homosexuality by disclosing to other people such as extended family

members. Although they believed that this was an important step in showing their support, they also felt that this was a private issue, specifically being the children's decision to disclose or not.

Limitations of Present Study Point Toward Future Research

The present study provided a rich description of the parents' process of coming to terms with their children's homosexuality. As well, it also described the children's process of their struggles to resolve their sexual orientation. As a result of having both the gay and lesbian children and their respective parents participate in this study, the researcher gained insight into the parent-child relationship. However, despite the richness of the data, the present study did have limitations.

The first limitation involved the sample which was chosen for this study. The researcher wanted to study the relationship between supportive parents and their gay and lesbian children. By studying supportive parents, the researcher believed that important knowledge could be gained regarding how these parents positively and negatively coped with raising their gay children. Also, the investigator wanted to understand more fully the process of parents coming to accept their children's homosexuality. Understanding this process may be helpful for mental health professionals and teachers who are trying to facilitate and support the healthy development of gay and lesbian children. As a result, approximately half of the participants who were involved in this study were associated with the support groups, PFLAG or Outreach. Indeed, the findings from the present study are biased as a result of this selective sample of parents. Certainly, future studies should involve a more diverse group of gays and lesbians and their parents. However, it is extremely difficult to study parents who are not supportive of their gay and lesbian children or who are not even aware of their children's homosexuality.

Another limitation of the present study is its retrospective nature. Both the adult children and their parents spoke of their experiences of their parent-child relationship from adolescence to the present. It is always questionable how accurate one's memories are of past experiences. Therefore, future studies would be beneficial to follow this coming out or identity formation process in gay and lesbian children as they approach and enter adolescence. Such a longitudinal study would provide a wealth of data about both the children's development (Savin-Williams, 1995) and how the parents come to terms with their children's homosexuality. However, such a study would be difficult to conduct as a result of the common assumption that homosexuality does not begin until adulthood (Savin-Williams, 1995). Because there are many people in society that continue to see homosexuality as a negative identity, many parents also would not want to be involved or have their children involved in a study which investigated the development of homosexual identity formation in children and adolescents for fear that they would be encouraging a homosexual identity.

The third limitation of the study involved the way that the data were collected and analyzed. It is impossible for any type of research study to not be influenced by the researcher. As a means of recognizing and controlling the researcher's biases, the phenomenological methodology required the researcher to articulate her biases and preconceived ideas concerning the topic of study through a process of self-reflection called bracketing. As a result of this bracketing process, any reader of the present study will be able to take the researcher's perspective into consideration (Osborne, 1990). However, as an additional means of lowering the presence of researcher's bias, the investigator had both the parents and the children validate the data derived from their interviews. Also, the findings of the children's perceptions are consistent with the parents' perceptions of the parent-child relationship. This validation of the

parents' process with the children's process suggests that the researcher's bias did not interfere in a way that distorted the findings.

The fourth limitation of this study is with regard to the generalizability of the findings. Because this is a qualitative study, it is not concerned with statistical generalizability. Rather, it is primarily interested in empathic generalizability, that is the extent to which the present study's findings resonate with the experiences of other parents who have gay children and other gay and lesbian children (Shapiro, 1986). A future quantitative study incorporating the qualitative data from the present study would be beneficial. For example, this qualitative data could be developed into a questionnaire which then could be distributed to a large number of gay and lesbian adolescents and their parents. By incorporating the rich qualitative data with a quantitative method, a more diverse group of parents and their gay and lesbian children could be studied, in order to see the process of coming to terms with homosexuality and the reactions of parents.

Although this study involved an equal number of gays and lesbians, the majority of research that has been conducted in the area of identity formation of homosexuals, has been conducted with gay males. Therefore, future studies, specifically focusing on lesbian and bisexual identity formation would be beneficial. Also, the majority of the participants in the present study were white and not members of an ethnic minority. Studies need to be completed with gays and lesbians who belong to an ethnic minority to assess how their identity formation process is similar to or different from white gays and lesbians (Savin-Williams, 1995). Finally, all developmental researchers and educators, need to recognize and challenge their own internalized homophobia. By dispelling their own homophobia, they can begin to address homosexuality as a positive sexual identity, thus acknowledging sexual minority youths as healthy vibrant adolescents. In recognizing homosexuality as a

healthy sexual orientation, researchers can begin to address the many research questions that have been ignored in the area of gay and lesbian adolescence.

Implications for Mental Health Professionals

The findings from the present study has important implications for the mental health professionals who work with gay and lesbian adolescents and their families. The most important implication is not with regard to the type of counselling approach, perspective, or techniques used by therapists and counsellors, but rather it involves examining and dispelling their own internalized homophobia. Homophobia does exist among the mental health profession. Such prejudice was evident as one survey of clinical psychologists reported that many in the profession were using biased inappropriate understanding, evaluation, and intervention in the treatment of a variety of gay and lesbian issues (Garnets et al., 1991). Another survey of clinical psychologists indicated that one in five therapists continue to treat homosexuality as a mental illness and 45% of these clinical psychologists did not consider their behaviors to be unethical (Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987). Indeed, no clinician is able to support and facilitate positive identity formation of gay and lesbian adolescents and young adults without confronting and overcoming their own biases regarding homosexuality.

In the current study, the gay and lesbian participants reported struggling to come to terms with their sexuality. Many of them experienced a negative period involving depression and suicidal ideation during adolescence. They believed that this negative period was partly or fully related to their homosexuality. They may have been trying to resolve the personal dissonance that they were feeling as a result of the incongruency of their homoerotic feelings with their internalized homophobia. The majority of parents in the present study believed that it was their love, support, and acceptance of their children's homosexuality that aided the children safely from

this negative place to a place of self-acceptance. This is an important finding for the mental health profession as the sample of participants in this study were unique as they had supportive parents. However, a large percentage of gay and lesbian youths struggle through a stage of identity confusion with no support. Then, when they disclose to their parents, many of them are abused and rejected by their parents and their families (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Therefore, it is imperative for mental health professionals to be aware of these unique needs of gay and lesbian youths who are trying to come to terms with their sexuality. The mental health clinicians and therapists can support the gay and lesbian adolescents during this conflictual time. They can also provide these adolescents with accurate gay positive educational materials. As well, they can provide information on both gay and lesbian support groups and parental support groups. By educating these adolescents and supporting them as well as providing them with peer and parental support networks, the therapists can aid these gay and lesbian adolescents in resolving their dissonance and achieving a healthy identity.

As previously discussed, disclosing to parents is a prime concern and stressor for gay and lesbian adolescents. In light of the abuse and rejection that many adolescents experience as a result of disclosing to their parents, it is essential for therapists to recognize the dangers with which gay adolescents are faced when considering disclosing (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). In particular, gay and lesbian adolescents, who are financially and emotionally dependent on their families, need to consider not only their emotional well-being, but also their actual physical and financial safety with their therapists prior to disclosing. Therapists must realize that every situation is different and, although all of the parents in the present study reacted with support and acceptance to their gay and lesbian children, many other parents react with rejection. Therefore, such a decision to disclose must be

made only after the therapist has aided the adolescent in exploring all the possible outcomes (D'Augelli et al., 1998).

Additionally, any counsellors who are working specifically with the parents of the gay and lesbian children must first normalize the parents' experiences. Then, they can utilize the four second order themes or stages which were derived from the parents' experiences as a therapeutic framework for aiding them towards accepting their gay and lesbian children. For example, the therapist can explore with the parents their experiences of witnessing their children's coming out. They can, in turn, explore and discuss the parents' many emotional reactions to their children's disclosures. After fully discussing their emotional reactions, the therapist can aid the parents in challenging and dispelling their own internalized homophobia, thus resulting in tolerance and openness to differences. As the parents become more open to their children's homosexuality, they will start to participate in acts of acceptance which involve the many ways that parents proactively show their love and acceptance to their gay and lesbian children. Therefore, the purpose of therapy is aiding the parents in accepting and supporting their gay and lesbian children.

Finally, all mental health professionals may find helpful the advice that the parents and the children in the present study gave other gay or lesbian children and their parents about issues regarding disclosure of homosexuality. Both parents and the adult children asserted that other potential parents must continue to love and to support their children. Additionally, the parents and their gay and lesbian adult children encouraged other parents to educate themselves on gay and lesbian issues, thus becoming more tolerant and open. As well, some of the parents and their children reminded other parents that their gay children were still the same children after their disclosures.

With regards to the advice for other gay and lesbian adolescents, the parents and their adult children advised other gay and lesbian children to have additional

support prior to disclosing to their parents, and not to be emotionally and financially dependent on their parents prior to disclosures. Also, many of the parents and their children reminded other children to evaluate their parents' potential reactions prior to disclosure and be prepared for the varying reactions. As well, some parents and children encouraged other children to disclose despite the potential parental reactions as they believed it is important for the children to be honest about who they are.

Implications for Educators

Research has indicated that verbal and physical abuse by peers is a serious concern for gay and lesbian adolescents. For example, one study found that 55% of the male adolescents described regular verbal abuse from their school peers. Additionally, 30% reported being physically assaulted, with approximately 50% of the assaults occurring on the school grounds (Remafedi, 1987a). Other research indicated that the majority of the peer abuse which was reported occurred mainly in school settings with many of the gay and lesbian youths reporting that they were afraid of having their homosexuality discovered. Not surprisingly, 32% of these gay and lesbian adolescents wanted to quit school (Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

In the present study, many of the gay and lesbian participants also recounted a negative period during adolescence which they believed was partly or fully related to their struggles with coming to terms with their homosexuality. This negative period was characterized by many to include depression, suicidal ideation and/or attempted suicide. In addition, some of these participants reported school and peer problems. Perhaps this negative period that many of the gay and lesbian participants reported may have been lessened if the educational institutions which they attended had been more gay positive.

Therefore, this study has significant implications for educators and the institutions in which they work. Just as homophobia needs to be examined and

dispelled in the lives of the mental health professionals who work with gay and lesbian adolescents and their families, so must all educators confront and dispel their biases and prejudices towards homosexuality in order to provide a safe and supportive environment in which gay and lesbian students can learn. One way to aid educators in this process is to educate them on issues regarding gays and lesbians. For example, all teachers and school support staff need to be aware of the unique challenges and difficulties with which gay and lesbian adolescents are faced so to aid these adolescents in their unique struggles to come to terms with their sexuality. This education process could occur by having gay and lesbian adults and/or supportive parents of gay and lesbian children come in to the school to speak to the teachers and school staff about homosexuality. The significance of educating school staff about homosexuality was evident in the findings of the present study, as both parents and children reported education as being key advice for other parents who may be trying to come to terms with their children's homosexuality.

Not only do teachers need to be educated but also schools must start educating their students about homosexuality in order to end the negative stereotypes and myths that continue to exist because of such ignorance. Gay and lesbian issues need to be addressed throughout the entire sexuality curriculum instead of only discussing such issues briefly as if such behaviors are deviant. By teachers and school staff recognizing homosexuality as a valid and normal identity, then such verbal and physical peer abuse which was previously discussed may lessen as children and adolescents become more tolerant and accepting of differences. Indeed, there are many other changes that could be discussed with regard to making schools more gay positive, but in order for any of this to become a reality, society has to become educated about the fact that gay and lesbian adolescents do exist. Also, society must recognize and accept that validating a gay and lesbian presence will not cause any

additional adolescents to be gay but rather will provide a safe place for those who are gay and lesbian to grow and accept their identities.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the present study, it has provided the researcher with a wealth of descriptive data about the parents' process of coming to terms with their children's homosexuality. The parents in the present study progressed through the following four key stages: Witnessing the Coming Out, Emotional Reactions to Disclosure, Shifting Towards Acceptance, and Acts of Acceptance. All of the parents reported that they had accepted their children's homosexuality which was demonstrated by their various proactive efforts. In addition to gaining new understanding of the parents' experiences, the present study also provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the children's process of coming to terms with their homosexuality. By studying the children's experiences, the researcher was clearly reminded of the importance of the adolescent period in the development of gay and lesbian identity formation. The significance of adolescence was evident as many of the gay and lesbian participants reported experiencing a negative period involving depression, suicidal ideation, and school-related problems during adolescence, with one child reporting an attempted suicide.

However, the most promising finding of the study was that the gay and lesbian participants, who had struggled through their adolescence, coping with depression, suicidal ideation and behaviors, as well as school related problems, survived this negative period. These gay and lesbian children safely moved from this dark negative place to a positive place of self-acceptance. Regarding the factors that contributed to their shifting from a negative to a more positive place, the parents reported that it involved the children coming out or disclosing to them and others as the children came to accept their sexual orientation. In turn, the majority of the parents believed

that it was their love, support, and acceptance that they showed to their gay and lesbian children that was vital to this shifting process. Indeed, this study seems to qualitatively support the significance of the parent-child relationship on the healthy development of gay and lesbian children.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These questions were developed in order to understand more fully the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children.

Sample Interview Questions For Parents

1. Could you describe to me your relationship with your gay or lesbian adult child?

2. Could you recount for me your experiences or strongest memories of your relationship with your child as he/she developed from adolescence to adulthood.

3. Could you recount your most positive experiences or memories of your relationship during this period of development (adolescence to adulthood)?

4. Could you recount your most negative experiences or memories of your relationship during this period of development (adolescence to adulthood)?

5. Could you describe what you think your child's perceptions are of the parent-child relationship?

6. Could you describe if and how the relationship changed following the child's disclosure or your discovery of his or hers sexuality.

7. If you could go back and change anything in your relationship, would you and if so, what would that be?

8. Do you want to make any other comments? Is there anything else you would like to discuss concerning your experiences of your relationship with your child?

Sample Interview Questions For Adult Child

1. Could you describe to me your relationship with parent(s)?

2. Could you recount for me your experiences or strongest memories of your relationship with your parent(s) as you developed from adolescence to adulthood.

3. Could you recount your most positive experiences or memories of your relationship during this period of development (adolescence to adulthood)?

4. Could you recount your most negative experiences or memories of your relationship during this period of development (adolescence to adulthood)?

5. Could you describe what you think your parent(s)' perceptions are of the parent-child relationship?

6. Could you describe, if and how the relationship changed following your disclosure or your parent(s)' discovery of your sexuality.

7. If you could go back and change something in your relationship, would you and if so what would that be?

8. Do you want to make any other comments? Is there anything else you would like to discuss concerning your experiences of your relationship with your parent(s).

APPENDIX B

STUDY DESCRIPTION

My name is Louise MacKay and I am a Doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. For my Doctoral dissertation, I am doing a descriptive study on the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children. I will be exploring parents' and their adult children's conceptual understanding of the parent-child relationship in its entirety from the adult children's adolescent years to the present. Both the positive and negative experiences of the adult children and their respective parents will be explored. In particular, if and how their relationship changed following the adult child's disclosure or the parent(s)' discovery of their child's homosexuality will be discussed.

This research is of importance as currently gay and lesbian adolescents and adults are faced daily with numerous stressors and discrimination. This research will aid clinicians, mental health professionals, parents, gays, and lesbians in understanding and strengthening the parent-child relationship. A stronger parent-child relationship may foster adolescents in developing a healthy sense of self and a stronger support network. These positive effects will aid gays' and lesbians' abilities to cope with daily stressors, thus lessening the likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviors. Additionally, this research will provide strong suggestions for developing therapeutic guidelines for working with families with gay and lesbian children, as no current guidelines are available.

If you are interested in being a participant in this study, your role will involve participating in two stages of the study. Any parent(s) and their respective adult gay or lesbian child(ren) may participate in both stages of the study. Each of the parents and their respective adult children will participate in an in-depth audio taped interview or telephone interview during this first stage. Those interested participants will make an initial telephone contact with me regarding the time and their choice of location for the interview. During the first meeting, prior to the beginning of the interview, I will allow us time to become acquainted and become aware of one another's backgrounds. After I have explained the nature and the purpose of the study, informed consent will be discussed and obtained from you. Also, during this first meeting, I will interview you by asking you to describe in as much detail as possible your experiences of the parent-child relationship. During this first interview, I would like you, in your own words, to tell me your experiences of your relationship with your parent(s)/gay or lesbian adult child. This interview will be tape-recorded and will be approximately 60 minutes.

This tape-recorded interview will be transcribed into a written form using pseudonyms for your name and any other names that you mention. Only myself and my supervisor (Dr. B. Paulson) will have access to the original tape and following the study, the tapes will be erased. Once the tapes have been transcribed, I will analyze

the data to determine the themes that represent your experiences of the parent-child relationship. For those interested parents and their respective adult children, who live outside of the Edmonton and Alberta area, after you have signed and returned your informed consent, a telephone or email interview will be conducted.

During the second interview, I will share and discuss my understanding of your experiences with you. This time will allow you to provide me with feedback regarding whether the findings truly are reflective of your experiences. Also after the study is completed, I would be glad to share my findings with you.

Once again, I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. As a result, you may discontinue the study at any time without penalty. If you do decide to discontinue the study, all information about you will be destroyed. In addition, if your participation in this study raises any concerns, a referral for support and counselling will be offered. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 492-5298.

Thanks,

J. Louise MacKay

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____, give my permission to participate in this study. I am aware that the study is being conducted as a part of Louise MacKay's Doctoral dissertation for her Doctoral degree, under the supervision of Dr. Barbara Paulson of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. I am aware that the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between parents and their gay and lesbian adult children. Through the use of the interview format, I will be asked to describe my experiences in as much detail as possible. I understand that I will be participating in one audio taped in-depth interview of approximately 60 minutes in length or a telephone or email interview.

I understand that my consent is voluntary and that if I choose, I can discontinue my participation in the study at any time without penalty. Also, I am aware that my name and the names of other people that I may mention will be replaced with pseudonyms so that it will be impossible to recognize me as a participant in the study. In addition, I am aware that Louise and her supervisor (Dr. B. Paulson) will be the only people with access to the tape recorded interview/ telephone interview notes. I also understand that Louise will erase the tape and destroy the notes after the themes have been extracted.

I am aware that the information obtained from the interview will be used by Louise for the purpose of her study. Also, I understand that the results of the study will be published as Louise's Doctoral dissertation and as well the results may be published in a professional journal.

Finally, I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can choose to discontinue the study at any time without penalty. Also, I understand that if any concerns arise for me while participating in this study, Louise will provide referral sources for support and counselling. Additionally, I know that if I have any concerns or questions about this research, I can call Louise at 492-5298.

Signature:_____

Date:_____